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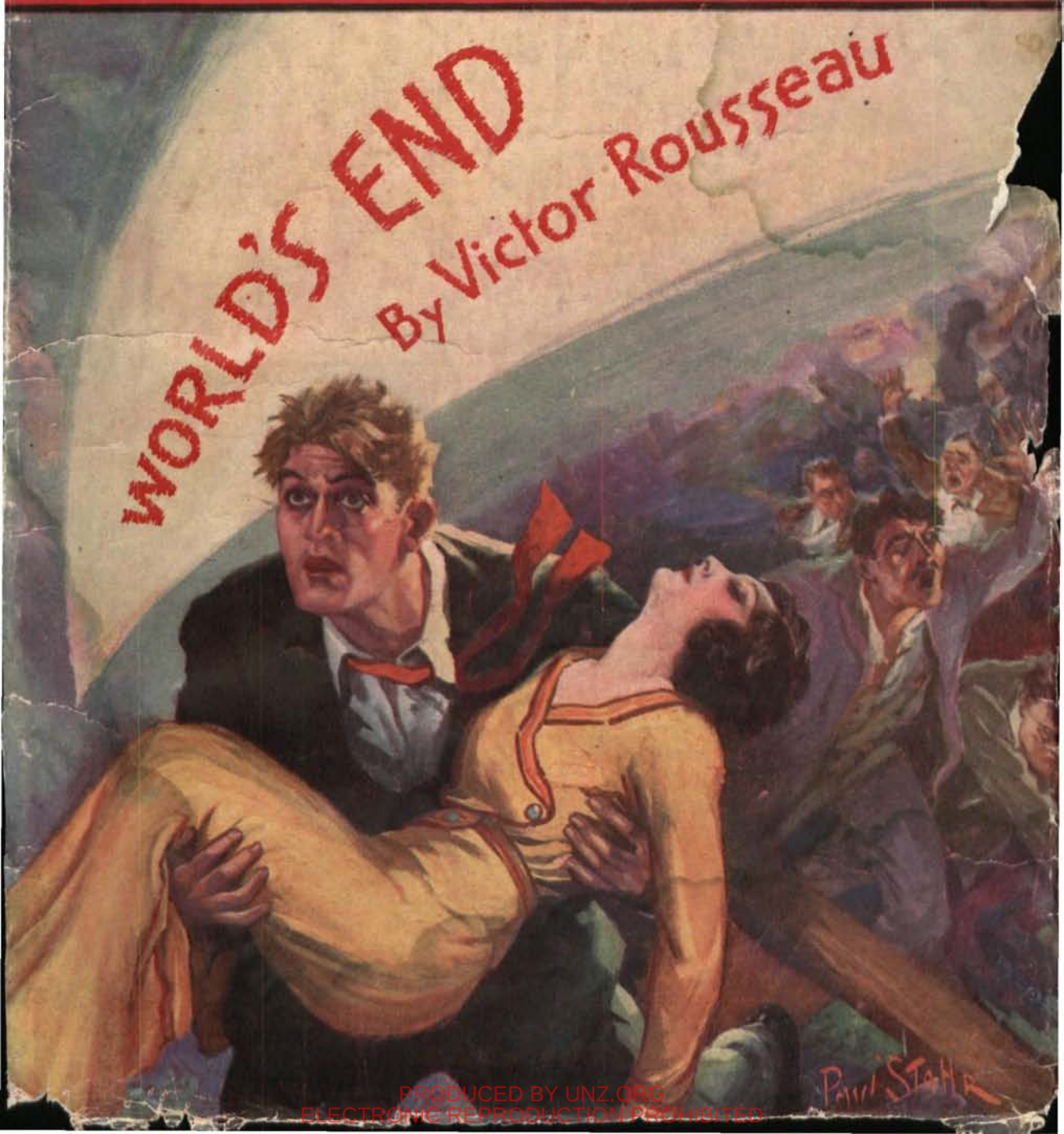

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31x5.25-21	2.95	1.15
28x5.50-18	2.95	1.15
29x5.50-19	2.95	1.15
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ARGOSY

Action Stories of Every Variety

VOLUME 239 — CONTENTS FOR JULY 8, 1933 — NUMBER 5

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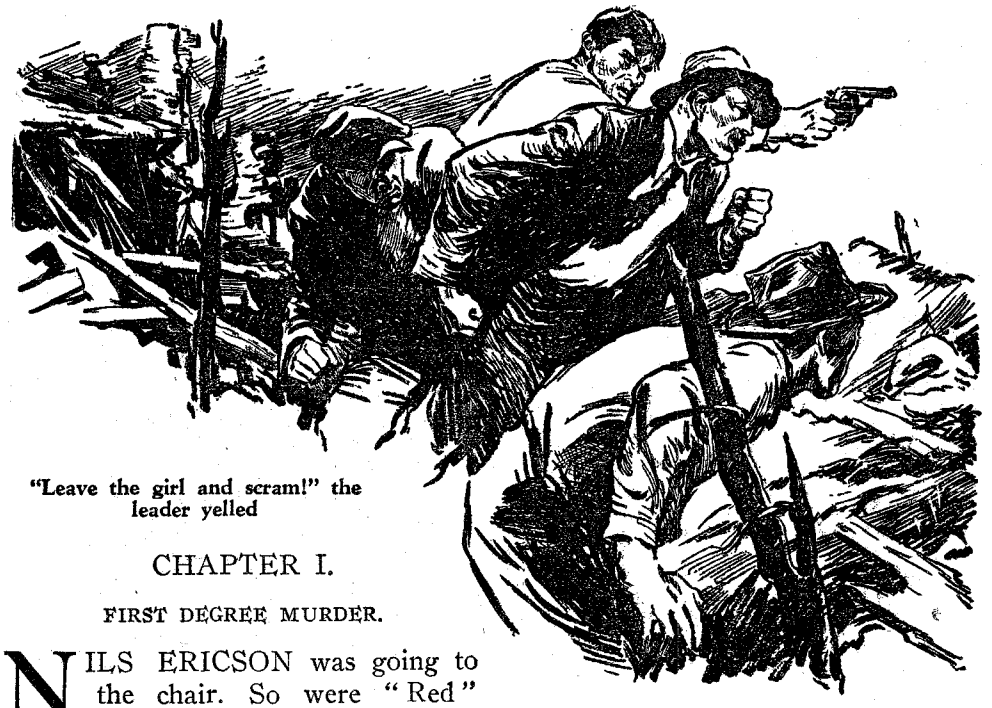
World's End

By VICTOR ROUSSEAU

Author of "The Vengeance Trail," "The Branded Man," etc.

Nils Ericson was due to die for a murder he had not committed—if the comet let the world last that long



"Leave the girl and scram!" the leader yelled

CHAPTER I.

FIRST DEGREE MURDER.

NILS ERICSON was going to the chair. So were "Red" Lewis and Paul Antonelli. A jury of citizens of Nassau County, New York, was going to send them there. They were doomed as surely as if the verdict had already been pronounced, and knew it. Each of the three could read his fate in the faces of the twelve good men and true as the presiding judge summed up at dusk in the courthouse at Mineola, Long Island.

Nils knew that the State had him where it wanted him, though he was innocent. Police Chief Tom Garry and the prosecuting attorney had used all the mechanism of their trade. After twenty-four hours of the third degree, Lewis and Antonelli had confessed, and implicated Nils. Of course, they had recanted, and Nils didn't care. A guy will admit almost anything when he has been sufficiently slugged with a rubber hose. They hadn't slugged Nils, though, only kept up a twenty-four hours barrage of questioning. The police knew their stuff.

Yes, and they knew their man. No torture could have wrung a confession from Nils. He was an American of the second generation, almost a giant in stature, a blond Viking in appearance, a primitive type overlaid with a veneer of education. Uncouth, not sullen. A misfit through environment rather than heredity. Now he was lis-

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tening to the judge as he summed up. Nils had all the fatalism of his northern race. He didn't care. They'd got him for something that he hadn't done. That was all right. He might have participated in the crime, if Red and Antonelli had taken him into their confidence when they hired his taxi. Though cold-blooded murder was foreign to his nature. Anyway, Nils didn't care.

derided this. It had done its worst, they said, in producing the eruptions and floods that had devastated nearly every continent. And, anyway, America was safe. All were insistent as to that.

The comet wasn't going to stop them from putting Nils on the hot seat. And he didn't care. He frowned down

Nils sprang to meet the rush

The electric lights had been turned on in the courtroom, but out of the east a long, fanlike streak of brilliant light shone through the windows, dimming them. The judge stopped in his charge to the jury.

"Pull down that shade!" he rasped.

A court attendant hastened to obey. The comet vanished, that comet ten times brighter than any of which the world had record, transforming night into high noon. A comet with a head as large as the moon, which, some averred, was going to tear the world to pieces. But the leading scientists scornfully upon the quaking crooks beside him, shrugged his shoulders.

A policeman grabbed him by the arm. Red Lewis and Antonelli were already descending the steps that led to the cells. The jury was retiring to consider its verdict. It wasn't likely to be out long. The judge had announced that he would be ready to receive the verdict before midnight.

Outside a newsboy was shouting, "Another earthquake in Chile! All the latest news about the comet!"

Nils sat down in his separate cell. Guilty—of course they'd find him

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guilty. There had been too many killings since the arrival of the comet. People had gone crazy. It was said that the tail exuded a poisonous exhalation that made men irresponsible. Society had to protect itself—while it lasted. No mercy for criminals now!

So long as Sing Sing stood, the electric chair would be working overtime. And nobody believed in the scaremongers. It seemed incredible that people would stop buying and selling, quarreling and making love—and burning murderers.

Nils's father had been a farmer on Long Island. After the recovery from the world depression, in 1933, he had done well. There had been five years of jobs for everybody. Then four years more of depression before economists realized that society would have to be reorganized.

Too much food in the world, too many goods, too many workers, too many machines. Socialism, anarchy, revolution—or the armed repression and the public doles that had enabled America to stagger on under the old forms of government. Rich men—one to each hundred of a dole-fed population, living secluded lives on their estates, protected by armed guards. Such men as Jared Enderby.

When Nils's father died, the farm had been confiscated for taxes. Nils had never been to high school. A great, uncouth, gangling lad, with a pair of fists that made him supreme among his kind, he seemed destined for manual labor. A son of Martha, not of Mary. No one dreamed of the big thoughts in his brain, the vague lust for dominion over men and nature. The sullen, slumberous depths of him had never yet been stirred to action.

Nils had worked with pick and shovel, bossed men, and then, through a lucky stroke, had got a job as driver of one of New York's municipal taxicabs. He had a room in a cheap tenement house on Eleventh Avenue, and subsisted on his earnings of about a hundred dollars a week—which was a mere pittance with the inflated currency of the year 1942.

HE had never even seen Red Lewis or Antonelli before that night when they stopped him at Columbus Circle and offered him two hundred dollars for the night trip out on Long Island. It was illegal to take private fares, for the city's means of traffic were organized to transport the workers to and from their jobs. Nils knew that something was wrong.

But he didn't guess right. With the enormous tax on distilled liquors, following the repeal of the Eighteenth Amendment, rum-smuggling had become even more lucrative than in the old days of Prohibition.

Rum-smugglers, of course, but—wrong? Not as Nils saw it. That two hundred dollars looked mighty big to him. So he had parked near Jared Enderby's house, at the edge of the big estate that sloped down toward the waters of the Sound, and waited. They'd told him he'd have to wait an hour or two. Quite O. K. for Nils.

Half an hour later shots had rung out, and the big house had become a blaze of light. Red Lewis came running back alone, blood pouring down his sleeve. "Step on her!" he yelled, as he leaped into the taxi.

Nils had got as far as the next village when the motor-cops surrounded him and opened fire, blew up his tires and sent his windshield smashing about his ears. It was not until then that Nils learned of the attempted robbery of old Enderby's safe, of the shooting

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down of the two armed guards, and of Antonelli's capture.

Nils was going over the trial again. The two crooks had been caught in Mrs. Enderby's bedroom, where the jewels were hidden. They had been identified by Jared Enderby, his wife, and Kay, the twenty-one-year-old daughter. Mrs. Enderby had sworn there was a third man, a big man with blond hair.

Under pressure upon the witness stand she had identified Nils.

Kay Enderby had stood out for him. No, there were only two men. Nils hadn't been one of them. Lovely, in spite of her distress, unshaken, in spite of the prosecuting attorney's insistence, she had been Nils's best witness. But the judge had pointed out that Nils's presence in the house, or absence from it, made no difference. He had been one of the gang, equally guilty if he had known their plans.

It was a long time since Nils had seen a girl like Kay Enderby, among the crowds of shabby folks who thronged the streets of New York. Some folks had all the breaks. Nils might have gotten him a girl like Kay, if things had been different. The sight of her had stirred that slumberous berserk instinct in him, to fight, achieve and conquer.

Wealth and dominion, and a girl like Kay Enderby!

THERE were quick movements at the head of the stairs, and shouting, then heavy footsteps in the corridor. Cell doors clicked open. Nils heard Antonelli's whining protest; then his own door opened, and two policemen stood in the entrance.

"Come along and get yours, big boy," said one of them. "The jury's coming into the courtroom."

Nils smiled, but his smile was more like the snarl of a beast at bay. "Weren't out long," he said. "Well, what's the verdict likely to be?"

"You'll know quick enough," grinned the other. "Get a move on, big fellow!"

Nils stepped out of his cell. Each of the policemen had a pistol in his hand. They were big men, but Nils towered above them. There had been no need to speculate about the verdict. First degree, of course. The jury couldn't have been out more than an hour, with the lives of three men at stake. It had been a foregone conclusion, in spite of Kay Enderby's testimony.

For an instant Nils felt that suppressed fury rising up within him, a murderous beast, tugging at its leash. To smash the two policemen to the floor, to make a dash for freedom . . .

Nils dallied with the thought during that instant. But common sense came to his aid, and showed him that the plan was impossible. Still, that was not what restrained him. It was pride. If he could have died in the attempt, he would have made it. But he would only be hammered senseless and recaptured. Some better chance might come.

As if sensing what was in his mind, the two policemen had moved in closer. With a shrug of his broad shoulders, Nils went up the stairs again, in the wake of the two crooks.

"All about the earthquakes! All about the comet! Long Island Sound goes dry!"

Newsboys were bawling everywhere about the courthouse. And, though the shades were drawn, and the electric lights were burning, there was an unnatural brightness without that dimmed the light within. High over-

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head the great comet sprawled, a fiery sign of doom writ in the heavens.

Only about a dozen men had waited in the courtroom to hear the death verdict. Even that had lost its thrill in the presence of that awful seneschal of the skies. Outside, the crowds congested all the approaches and filled the streets, white faces blinking upward at that messenger of doom.

Some one was calling for silence. But there was silence in the courtroom already. The jury was filing in. The few spectators rose as the judge entered and took his seat. His movements were quick and nervous. He knew what the verdict must be, and he wanted to get the proceedings over.

Nils, glancing sardonically at the faces of the twelve, saw that each man's face was turned away, a sure sign of the decision.

A gavel fell. The court clerk was speaking to the foreman. Now the foreman was answering. Nils heard:

"We find the defendants, Alfred Lewis, Paul Antonelli, and Nils Ericson, guilty of murder . . . in the first degree, as charged."

A gasp from Red, a muttered snarl from the Italian. But Nils grinned and threw back his shoulders.

At the demand of the young lawyer who had been assigned to the defense, the jury was being polled. Nils wasn't listening any longer. Again he seemed to see the face of Kay Enderby upon the witness stand. To win his freedom, to fight, to crush, to snatch her for himself, and, with her, wealth, power, dominion. Or to go down to death, battling with berserk fury . . . such were his thoughts.

A policeman grasped his arm, and he turned and plodded down the steps. The sentence was to be pronounced upon the morrow. Nils had heard that much. Just one of the law's little jokes, that was all.

CHAPTER II.

THE ENDERBY HOME.

JARED ENDERBY'S estate was one of the largest on the north shore of Long Island. It covered about a thousand acres, and included an experimental farm, a rich man's hobby. It employed about a score of domestics and outdoor workers. The imposing house, built in imitation of a Florentine palace, rose out of a grove of trees not more than a mile from the Sound.

It was of white stone, with a long, winding drive leading up to the long terrace. Behind it were the garage and stables, and an older garage that had been converted into a headquarters for Enderby's armed guards, doubly a necessity since the advent of the comet had loosed the already tottering social system.

Inside the house was a long hall, its floor covered with an enormous rug, woven in imitation of a famous prayer-rug at Ispahan. Two complete sets of fifteenth century armor guarded the threshold, and above them were helmets, maces, swords, battle-axes, genuine antiques which Jared Enderby had procured in Europe.

It was an interesting taste in a man whose bloodiest interest consisted in eighteen holes of golf with the rector of Saint John's. Perhaps it corresponded to some submerged fighting part of his nature—for Jared Enderby was one of the most aggressive speculators in the Street. He neither asked nor received quarter. The former would have been useless, and the latter was unnecessary.

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Jared Enderby was standing on the upper porch of his home. With him was the Reverend Philip Haynes, who had been his guest at dinner that evening. From the drawing room behind them came the faint sounds of a male and a female voice, blending with the louder tones of jazz from the loud-speaker.

At that moment Walter Ferrand, Jared's confidential representative, was asking Kay for the tenth time to marry him, but Kay, not in the least disturbed, was telling him that she felt more like a sister to him.

"I'm certainly glad that Mrs. Enderby has arrived safely at Pinehurst," the rector, a jolly, red-faced man of fifty, with thick, white hair, was saying. "I suppose that she'll be staying there till—till that thing's gone."

He looked up at the comet, blazing from the horizon to the zenith, its head, a ball of vivid, blue-white flame, dimming the full moon that hung in the east.

"Yes, for at least a month," Jared answered. "They say it will have become invisible by then. Of course, I don't take any stock in that absurd scandalmongering, but Pinehurst is supposed to stand on a strip of paleozoic rock, or something of the sort, I understand, and neither earthquakes nor tidal waves can touch it. And, after the shock of the burglary, and the shooting, you understand—"

"I certainly do. And I hope those three ruffianly murderers have already received their just sentence," replied the rector. "It may sound unchristian to say that, but in these days society has got to protect itself. Since that thing appeared"—he looked up at the comet again—"the masses seem to have got completely out of hand.

"Why, who would have believed, even five years ago, that a man in your position would have to protect his family and himself with armed guards?"

There was a touch of bitterness in Jared Enderby's assent. He had built his home so he could live like a country gentleman, and he had become a prisoner instead.

Since the advent of the comet he had had an armed escort to the specially guarded train that was known as the "millionaires' special," and conveyed him and others from the big estates nearby into New York each morning.

Armed guards patrolling his grounds, and watching over Kay whenever she left the house, an armed chauffeur accompanying himself or his daughter whenever either of them went out driving—who would have expected to live to see such times?

It had been bad enough since the depression had come back, but, since the advent of the comet, Long Island had become the stamping ground for all the thugs in Queens. Hold-ups, robberies, kidnapings were of almost daily occurrence everywhere within a radius of fifty miles of New York.

Which explained the vehemence with which the Reverend Philip Haynes had spoken.

"I GUESS we'll get things reorganized after the comet's gone," said Jared. "They say the worst is over, though nobody seems able to explain why the Sound has gone dry. Well, there's going to be a big expenditure on public works, if New York is to remain a port. Dredging the Sound and the Narrows will create employment, anyway, and perhaps start the wheels of prosperity revolving once more.

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"And it's no secret to you, Philip, that big things are impending at Washington. We can't run the country with our antiquated Constitution. Not Fascism exactly, but some device to put competent men at the head of things, even if it involves a sort of *coup d'état*.

"Hannings, of the Jamaica Trust, Loan and Mortgage Association, stands pretty close to some of the big men—well, to myself and Morgan Filson. He's got a big pull at Albany, you know, and we can swing things at Washington enough to—well, I think there's a big surprise coming, Philip."

"Well, any change will certainly have to be for the better," replied the rector. "By the way, it's a queer thing about the golf course, isn't it?"

"What's that?" queried Jared.

"Haven't you heard about it? Why, a goodish portion of the course has become flooded. It's turned into a shallow lake, with a regular swamp around it, this last week-end. You know that depression in the middle of the twelfth hole? Yesterday it was a pond two feet deep. I had a brassie shot that would have gone clean onto the green, and the ball dropped into that confounded water-trap."

"We'll have to have a game," said Jared. "Maybe to-morrow. Hello, my dear." He turned as Kay appeared upon the porch, followed by a slightly built, well-dressed man of about thirty, of the executive type.

"Dad, it's just come over the radio. They've convicted Nils Ericson," said Kay. "It's 'guilty of murder in the first degree.' Oh, dad, something must be done about it!"

Jared Enderby took a step toward the girl, who was leaning against the porch wall. Her face was deathly white. He didn't know what to say. As a matter of fact, he had believed her story, that Nils had not been in the house, rather than her mother's hysterical tale. But, after all, the taxi driver had been in the plot. He was guilty equally with the two others.

And Jared had bitterly resented his daughter's having to appear upon the witness stand at all.

"Dad, you must do something," Kay was pleading. "I'm sure that poor fellow was simply the dupe of those two other men. I'll never forget the look in his eyes when I was giving my evidence."

The rector cleared his throat. "My dear Miss Kay," he protested, "you surely realize that he had every opportunity to place his case before a jury. The State appointed a very good lawyer to defend him. Even if he was not in this house, at least he was privy to the murder plot."

"He knew nothing about it," answered Kay. "He's innocent."

The air of finality with which she said this seemed to leave no loophole for response. The Reverend Philip Haynes shook his head in a deprecating manner. Kay turned to her father.

"Dad, you've got some influence, surely?" she asked.

"Not in that field, my dear. If it was a matter of raising a few million dollars now—"

"You know the prosecuting attorney, Mr. Gregson. If you'll exert your influence with him, I'm sure something can be done. At least, you can hire the best lawyer available, to take the case to the Court of Appeals."

Walter Ferrand, the young fellow who had been with Kay in the drawing room when the news came over the radio, advanced, touched Kay's arm. He was one of the select band whom Jared Enderby had marked for ad-

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vancement in his trust company. Jared seldom made a mistake, and, besides having a pretty level head, Walter had all the social requirements for success.

And he could play a good game of golf, and his score seldom touched ninety-five.

"I'm sure Mr. Enderby will do all he can in the matter, Kay," he said. "But, after all, why should you distress yourself about such a ruffian?"

The words were not tactful, but then neither Walter Ferrand, nor Jared, nor anybody else had ever been able to discover why Kay was so interested in the fate of Nils Ericson. It was impossible to imagine a girl of her upbringing being sentimentally interested in the fate of a blond-headed murderer, who had nearly frightened her mother to death besides killing two of the guards.

Kay turned toward Walter. "Do you know, sometimes I almost think I hate you?" she asked bitterly.

KAY lay in her bed, her mind a whirl of conflicting thoughts. Downstairs she could still hear the radio blaring away. The President was speaking from Washington, leading a symposium of astronomers, who were addressing a nation-wide audience upon the subject of the comet.

The peril had already passed, he was saying, his rich, vibrant voice filling the room. At nine o'clock that night the comet had rounded the sun. It was speeding back into outer space, and not for millions of years would it reappear to trouble mankind. By that time—if he might speak frankly—it was probable that the political differences which separated the two major parties of the United States would have been composed.

Just the right touch, the little note of humor that was likely to reassure the public. Business as usual, and everything was fine. God's gifted land had been spared the horrors that had overtaken other nations.

Kay lay sleepless for a long time after the loudspeaker had ceased, and Walter Ferrand and the rector had driven away. The news of Nils Ericson's conviction had so stunned her that everything seemed to have become unreal.

Three weeks before—two weeks before, she had accepted Walter as a part of the comfortable, if guarded life that she had always known. He was her regular escort to the country club. He had asked her several times to marry him, and Kay hadn't been sure that she wouldn't accept him one of these days.

But the trial scene had shocked her even more than the burglary and the shooting, the sight of the poverty about her, the dreadful atmosphere of the courtroom, the tragedy of the three men on trial for their lives.

She had quarreled with her mother when Mrs. Enderby had identified Nils as one of her assailants. She knew Nils hadn't been in the house, and she had fought hard for his life upon the witness stand.

Now it had all been in vain, and Kay groped frantically for some means of saving him.

Her father might be cajoled into hiring a good lawyer to represent Nils before the Court of Appeals. But he would probably talk and promise, and let the matter slide. She must act herself. She must see Gregson, the prosecuting attorney, the first thing in the morning, and insist that there had been a miscarriage of justice. To Kay, supreme in her little world, this seemed no difficult matter.

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But her father would never let her go into Mineola without a guard, and not even with one, if he knew what her purpose was. She must slip out of the house.

"You may put the lights out, Pompson," Kay heard her father saying to the English butler.

Fortified by her resolution, Kay composed herself to sleep.

CHAPTER III.

TRAIL OF THE COMET.

IT was barely three weeks, though it seemed an eternity, since the great comet had swung into view, blazing its way through the firmament in its parabolic course around the sun. In that course it would come mighty close to Earth.

It was no nebulous orb, like other comets of history, but a blue-hot star, ten times the size of the sun, and with a fan-like tail, pulled out by solar attraction, which stretched half-way across the heavens. The tail was of the thinnest of gases, it was true, but the head was the peril.

The great star had been visible by day and night, and for nights past crowds in all the cities of America had filled all the open spaces to watch its progress in Earth's direction. Yet there had been a strange fatalism, in spite of the dire predictions of the scaremongers that the end of the world was at hand. Life had gone on just the same as before the comet blazed into the skies. And, in any case, human existence couldn't be worse, even if the world was going to be pulled out of shape, like a rubber ball, or blown to cinders, as some astronomers predicted, by the pull of the vast, hostile body.

One scientist had calculated that it had a periodicity of millions of years. On its last advent, he announced, it had pulled the moon out of the bed of the Pacific, and sent it hurtling into the skies, to be Earth's satellite.

All along the Andes, through Japan, New Zealand, Italy, Iceland, wherever a geological "fault" existed, there had been eruptions on a scale never before known in history. Half Sicily had been devastated by the blowing up of Etna. The summit of Vesuvius had descended over Naples in molten, raining rock.

Twice daily enormous tides had swept the globe. Islands had vanished, new ones had ascended from the depths. Each hour the radio announced some new disaster somewhere.

But, unless the whole world was disrupted, New York was safe, Professor Clay, of Harvard, had averred. There existed no geological fault except a minor one about a hundred miles out in the Atlantic. The city was built upon the oldest, solidest rocks in the world. She was safe, even admitting that the sea channel had risen, that a string of liners was stranded off the Narrows, and that Long Island Sound was dwindling to a mere thread of water winding through a marsh.

And, even though fugitives were pouring inland daily from the threatened Pacific Coast, America was safe from the Rockies to the Alleghanies. The President himself had broadcasted that fact almost nightly for two weeks past. The rocks beneath the greater portion of Uncle Sam's domain were as solid as Uncle Sam himself.

Which was not exactly true, but none of the experts was going to deny it, and, had any done so, no newspaper would have published his statement.

And the comet was passing. It was rounding the sun, rushing back into

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the depths of space. It had done its worst, and old Earth, in spite of tides and eruptions, had stood reasonably firm.

IN the great broadcasting station on Long Island, two men, who were waiting to speak, smiled cynically at each other as that deep bass voice, relayed over several hundred miles of wires, boomed unquenchable optimism.

One of them was a professor at a Californian university. The other was a famous English physicist named Ridgway, who had happened to be on a visit to America when the great comet flashed into human ken.

The professor turned to his companion. "Well, he'll keep them quiet until noon to-morrow, at any rate," he said, "and then I guess nothing will make any difference."

"Three minutes after noon," the Englishman corrected him. "What shall we be then, I wonder? Shall we unconsciously solve the problem of force versus matter? Shall we be hydrogen particles in the heart of the sun, battering one another in our mad endeavor to reach the zero of outer space? A hell of heat such as the imaginations of even the theologians have never attained to!"

"Whatever we are destined to be," said the professor, "fortunately all consciousness will have disappeared forever. And Nature will continue on her serene way as calmly as if our petty personalities had never risen up to question her.

"I sent my daughter a draft for five hundred dollars this morning, payable in Paris. She's taking a course at the Sorbonne. And I received a tax bill, which I didn't pay. Now why did I send that draft and leave the tax unpaid?"

"Human nature," said the physicist. "Queer how our complex carbon compounds can evolve mentality and will! By the way, how many of these men know," he asked, indicating the assembled scientists, "that at exactly three minutes after noon to-morrow, the combined pull of sun, moon, and comet, will produce the climax of the heavenly comedy, and send Earth flying into a trillion fragments?"

"I guess most of them know," replied his friend. "And, if you ask me, I'll say they're putting up a pretty good front. Hello! The President's signing off. You're next, aren't you? You're not going to tell the public that—"

"I am not," answered the Englishman. "I'm going to hand the public the best line of what you call 'bunk' that I can manufacture."

"You'll be staying with us in New York to-night?"

"I don't think so. There's quite a nice little hotel out here. I think I shall spend my last night here and meditate upon the inscrutable destiny of man, and sleep late in the morning."

By executive order, the press thoughout the nation had been clamped down. Nobody was to know, until late the following afternoon, when, it was believed, the danger would be definitely over, that the coast of California had been engulfed in the Pacific.

From the tip of lower California to Oregon, and, again, from British Columbia to the north of Alaska, the coast had become a steaming ruin.

San Francisco and Los Angeles, a hundred towns and villages had been wiped out in the latest and most terrible of all the eruptions. The great mass of the Rockies, crumpled up æons before by the westward drift of the American continents, had heaved itself

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skyward another mile, spewing its top across the intervening desert. And simultaneously the whole Pacific Coast had dropped five thousand fathoms under the sea.

All the machinery of the government had been put to work to keep the knowledge of this from the East. Newspapers had been censored, telegraph offices had been closed, and the Federal air police had halted every eastbound plane, even mail planes, and forced them to descend.

Within a day or two the news must leak out. But by that time the president believed that emergency measures could be taken to insure the continuance of law and order throughout the Middle West and East.

In justice to him it must be said that he, in turn, had been kept in ignorance of the doom that impended over Earth. The President's optimistic broadcasts had been quite sincere. At that moment a proclamation of martial law lay on his desk, awaiting his signature, and he had just turned away from the microphone that had been installed in the White House with the consciousness of duty done.

Perhaps the Englishman and his American friend had been the only two persons who had been sure of their facts, among those who thronged the broadcasting station, awaiting their turns to spread the message of optimism among the waiting millions.

There was even the possibility that they had been wrong in their calculations.

A THOUSAND towns and villages between New York and Kansas listened to the messages of good cheer that came from the broadcasting station. A million families went happily to bed, encouraged by the information that the danger which had threatened Earth had passed.

Millions of others seized the occasion to make a celebration of the good news. Enormous throngs surrounded the loudspeakers in the parks and streets that transmitted the good news.

The City of New York was making revel, as if this night were election night. Young women, armed with metal stars with long, colored streamers, tickled the faces of those who struggled through the throngs. Peddlers plied a brisk trade in comet-shaped balloons that swayed above the heads of the populace.

Jokes, laughter, parties on roof-tops, gazing skyward. Nowhere was there any panic. The mighty buildings of New York, rising white and majestic, seemed a guarantee of permanence and stability. Lovers sat in the parks, absorbed in each other. This, too, was permanent. The comet was the big joke of the century, and it appealed to America's sense of humor. It was less real than poverty, joblessness, quarrels and makings up, the routine actions of the day.

A grimmer touch was the armed police cars that patroled the streets. In outlying districts, homes were barricated against desperate men who slunk through the shadows cast by the blazing star high overhead. In Union Square a madman, standing on a soapbox, was proclaiming the imminent end of the world. The police pulled him down and hustled him away.

At nine o'clock that night the comet had passed the sun. Each moment the danger was growing less. And New York still stood! After midnight a spirit of boisterous turbulence took hold of the populace. The streets, already packed, grew jammed. Swaying, seething crowds, their heads craned up-

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ward, watching. If the sun rose on the morrow, all would be well. The sun would rise! A huge illuminated sign on the Times Building was saying:

AT SUNRISE THE COMET WILL BE RUSHING BACK INTO OUTER SPACE. THE DANGER IS ALREADY PAST. THE WORLD IS SAFE.

The night wore on. Everywhere the roaring crowds patroled the streets. They were looking eastward now. Looking for the promised sunrise of the day of liberation. Not until the sun appeared above the horizon would the cold brilliance of the blue-white star begin to pale a little.

But there were red streaks in the east, over Brooklyn, and, with a spontaneous movement, the crowds began surging toward the East River. The east grew rosy; suddenly, above the skyline, the sun's rim appeared.

A great shout of exultation rose from the throats of the packed multitudes.

CHAPTER IV.

ON THE LINKS.

JARED ENDERBY thought that Kay was sleeping late when he took his seat beside the armed chauffeur and started toward the golf club after an early breakfast.

He had arranged to meet Mr. Haynes at ten, and they would play a pleasant, leisurely round by half-past twelve. There was a substantial friendship between Jared and the jovial rector, who was, of course, an honorary member of the club.

Jared Enderby looked up at the great star, trailing its luminous tail across the sky, the star a huge moon, the tail, by daylight, a tenuous thread across the horizon.

"Well, Jenkins, I guess that fellow's done his worst," he addressed his chauffeur as they sped along the country road. "You heard the President on the radio last night, and those other fellows?"

"We did, sir," answered the chauffeur. "I guess the danger's over now. A lot of fuss about nothing. I'll tell you, sir," he continued, with sudden gravity, "no matter what happens to them foreign nations, God won't let any harm come to America."

"Sort of most-favored-nation clause in the celestial organization, eh?" smiled Jared genially. "Well, I'm not so sure I don't agree with you, Jenkins."

The high-powered car ran inland. It passed through a village, where a policeman, with one of the last remaining stop-go signs left in America, was directing non-existent traffic. The officer, recognizing Jared's car, spun the sign swiftly, and brought his hand to his cap. Jared waved to him genially as he passed.

Nothing seemed to have changed in the past few years, Jared was thinking, except that there were shabbier groups at the corner drug-and-beer stores, and the houses needed painting. Well, all that would be remedied, now the comet was departing. The world would have to be reorganized. Not socialism, though. More along the lines of a plan that a number of powerful men had been secretly working out for some time past—a national committee of trust heads, in control of all commodities.

The clubhouse came into sight, a long, red building, set pleasantly in a grove of trees. Some half dozen cars were already drawn up in front of it. On either side the links extended, red and white flags fluttering in the slight

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breeze, and here and there little groups of players were visible. It was all so natural that even the huge white star overhead seemed no longer hostile.

The Reverend Philip Haynes was waiting at the entrance to the first green, with two caddies. It was understood that, when the two played golf, Jared Enderby paid for the caddies.

"Well, Phil, on time as usual," said the financier genially. "How's that twelfth hole that you were speaking about last night?"

"You'll have to switch to the fourth course at the eleventh hole, Mr. Enderby," said one of the boys. "The lower part of the first course is mostly under water."

Jared Enderby was not much interested in natural phenomena. He had accepted the narrowing of Long Island Sound exactly as he would have accepted the drying up of his artificial lily and goldfish pond, something to be remedied by a gang of plumbers and some cement. He drove two hundred yards from the first tee and grinned as the Reverend Philip sliced his ball into the stubble. With a satisfied smile he started down the fairway.

"How's that for a neat five?" he chuckled as the rector holed his ball in eight, after what sounded suspiciously like an invocation to the nether deity.

"It was that confounded sand-pit," grumbled the rector. "But this is my lucky hole, Enderby. Watch me!"

THE two men drove in succession, sending their balls straight down the fairway within a few feet of each other. They started after them side by side.

"Phil, I'm worried about Kay," Jared confided as they set off. "I don't like the way she's worrying about that ruffian who was sentenced to the chair last night. I'm afraid she's going to let me in for a peck of trouble about him."

"Oh, I guess she'll forget about him," answered the rector. "After all, it was a trying experience for her, having to give evidence at the trial."

"She went off to bed without another word to me," Jared complained. "That means there's something brewing in her mind. I'm afraid there's going to be a storm when I get back."

He was worried because he couldn't see anything to do about the matter. And to hire a lawyer to appeal on Kay's behalf would mean more trouble when his wife got home. Mrs. Enderby had insisted that Nils had been in her room. So he spoke little for the next hour or so. The rector's score was three ahead of his, an unusual thing, but he didn't care as much as usual. He was aroused from his thoughts when, after dropping his ball into the eleventh hole, he became aware of a great sheet of water extending beyond, like an inland lake.

"Why—when did this get here?" he asked his caddy in astonishment.

"She's been swelling up quick since yesterday, Mr. Enderby," answered the boy. "They say it's the water seeping in from the Sound."

Jared moved along the soggy fairway. And now he could see that the lake was increasing in size at an appreciable rate. It was creeping toward him at the rate of some six inches a minute. A prodigious quantity of water must be pouring in through some subterranean channel.

"It's dry over on the fourth course, sir," said the caddy, trailing along with the bag of clubs.

"Look, Phil, what's that over

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there?" cried Jared, pointing toward the eastern horizon.

Jared Enderby was not given to admiring natural scenery. His emotions at the sight of a lake or mountain, or a cloud effect, might generally have been summarized by the words "pretty," or "picturesque." But something queer was undoubtedly happening in the east.

A reddish cloud hung low over the horizon, and it seemed to be extending rapidly across the sky. A blood-colored cloud, coming up with the rapidity of a thunderstorm, and racing toward the zenith, where that monstrous star was blazing. And even where Jared stood the air seemed to be thickening, and changing to the color of blood—a rusty red.

Everything was curiously still, yet somewhere there seemed to be a faint and distant rumbling, though so far away that Jared was conscious of it by some interior perception rather than by hearing.

The rector came to his side. "What is it, Enderby?" he asked in a husky whisper. "It looks like—like the Day of Judgment!"

"Oh, snap out of it and pull yourself together, Phil!" answered Jared. "Volcanic dust, probably, from some eruption somewhere. It travels all round the globe."

"The Day of Judgment—clouds and glory," muttered the Reverend Philip Haynes, as if he had not heard.

The caddies were likewise staring up at that advancing cloud. And even Jared, in spite of his robust common sense, felt something indescribably awesome in that mounting opacity which had already blotted out the sun. Its edges touched the head of the comet, which shone through it with a strange and sepulchral light.

The cry of a bobolink was the only thing that broke the silence, and that was not repeated. There was no sound anywhere, and it was growing twilight, as on the occasion of a solar eclipse.

"SHALL we cross to the fourth course—or shall we turn back?" chattered the rector.

"Maybe it's a typhoon," said Jared, fighting down his sense of terror. He glanced angrily about him. Even the caddies seemed afraid. The fears of his companions were infecting him.

He pulled himself together. "I don't care what you do, Phil," he answered in a voice that he strove hard to render calm. "I'm going to finish this game."

He turned in the direction of the fourth course, the nearest green of which was about two hundred yards away. He put his ball on a tee, took his stance and swung his brassie.

Never had Jared Enderby struck his ball more truly. He felt the impact of the club upon it at exactly the proper place. And yet that ball appeared to be possessed of a devil.

It shot straight forward for about a hundred yards, then suddenly curved upward and came soaring back toward him like a boomerang. It thudded into the turf beside him. At the same instant a violent shock precipitated Jared to the ground.

He picked himself up with an oath, quite regardless of the rector's presence. He got to his feet. He couldn't stand straight. It was as if an invisible and gigantic hand was pushing him forward. It was as if the whole world had suddenly got out of plumb.

The racing clouds of red had almost covered the sky. Through them the huge star seemed to grin like a death's head. Then a deluge of water struck Jared and flung him down again.

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A roaring hurricane, arising instantaneously out of the silence, lashed him with torrents of ice-cold rain. Rain salt upon his lips, as if the red cloud had snatched up all the waters of the sea and was pouring them upon the land in a new universal deluge.

The rain lashed Jared's face like whips. He had never conceived the possibility of such a storm as that. Hammered flat by the torrent, he felt as if he was being knouted by a giant.

He groaned, and tried to shield his face with his hands. "Phil! Phil!" he bawled.

There came no answer. The red cloud that surrounded him had changed to blackness. Jared Enderby lay flattened against the sod, lashed by the pitiless whips of the rain, while overhead the mighty hurricane roared and thundered.

HE must have lost consciousness for a while. When he came back to himself he was lying in a shallow depression in the ground, beaten out by the force of the tempest, and he was aching in every limb.

The rain was still lashing him, but less violently, and it was no longer icy cold. Nor did it taste salt upon his lips. A genial warmth pervaded the air. Groaning, Jared raised his head and looked up through thick, swirling mists.

"A cloudburst," he muttered. "It's that damned comet. I'm going home."

But there was no longer any sign of the comet through the mists, not even the least luminosity in the sky, from which that drenching downpour of lukewarm rain descended.

But through the fog, to Jared's immense relief, there came the rector's voice. "Enderby! Enderby! Where are you?" it sounded.

"Here, here!" shouted Jared, trying to struggle to his feet. "There's been a cloudburst or something. Where are the caddies?"

He yelled, but no answer came. Only the muttered objurations of the rector, as he wormed his way along the rain-drenched swamp to Jared's side.

"Where have you been?" asked the Reverend Philip. "I've been calling you this half-hour past."

"Been? I've been here," snapped Jared. "That confounded cloudburst knocked me out and stunned me. Where have you been?"

"I've been here, too," the rector groaned. "I couldn't do a thing but lie flat on my face and try to protect myself against that deluge of water. It looks like it's letting up now," he added, with an upward glance.

It certainly was clearing. Through the rifts in the mist Jared could see patches of an inky sky overhead.

"Why, the comet's gone!" he shouted. "Blown its damn head off, maybe. Look, there,s the sun!"

The sun's orb, looking like an enormous, flattened tangerine, appeared through the fog. But there was no sign of the huge star that had been the most conspicuous object in the firmament for three weeks past.

"I'm going home," said Jared, getting upon his knees. "Does that suit you, Phil?"

The two men struggled to their feet and looked about them. They saw the links stretching away, through the mists, but there were no longer any signs of the lake.

"Enderby, something queer's happened," said the rector, staring at his friend.

"Something damned queer," echoed Jared. "Lord, how my ears are ringing, and yet I feel kind of light-footed

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—don't you? Let's get back, Phil. I guess that this game's yours."

CHAPTER V.

KAY'S MISSION.

AT about eight-thirty on the same morning, Kay Enderby, attired in an old dress, a little out of date, and an inexpensive little hat that she had bought with the intention of presenting to one of the maids, slipped quietly down the back staircase of the house and went out quickly through the rear entrance, bent on escaping the notice of the guards.

None of the domestics saw her. The only person who did observe the slight figure flitting from the house was a new guard, who was unacquainted with her, having been employed only for the past three days.

He was standing at the entrance of the disused garage that had been fitted up for the guards' use. He looked at Kay with interest, but only that which any normal-minded young guard might naturally feel in a young and pretty maid who was taking a stroll at that hour of the morning.

He made a movement toward her, as if proposing to enter into conversation, but Kay slipped past him, and in another minute was traversing the grounds of her father's estate, leading down to the road and the railroad station, which was less than a mile away.

Kay had not dared to get her car from the garage, and she knew that her father, haunted perpetually by the fear of her being kidnaped, had given orders that she was not to leave the grounds unescorted.

At nine o'clock the train, known as the "millionaires' special," was due to leave the station, and there was another train, starting three minutes later, which carried commuters of humbler standing. One of these Kay meant to take.

She had no money with her, but since the trains of the six boroughs were all municipalized, and free, there would be nothing to pay.

She hurried along the road. Occasionally a car shot past her, but nobody recognized her in the outfit that she was wearing, and in a few minutes she was in sight of the station.

A score of cars were already drawn up outside it. Kay could see the "millionaires' special" winding its way through the cut, about a half-mile distant. There was no time to be lost. Kay quickened her pace.

She reached the station just as the whistle of the train began. It would be easy to lose herself among the crowd thronging the platform. But suddenly Kay's heart sank. Drawn up outside the station she recognized a bright maroon coupé—recognized it only too well, for she had ridden in it innumerable times, and had been proposed to in it five times.

It was Walter Ferrand's car. Walter was spending the summer at a house not far away, but, by an odd slip of thought, Kay hadn't considered the probability that he would be taking that particular train into New York.

Kay tried to swerve, but fate seemed to be against her. At that moment, Walter Ferrand, as immaculately dressed as ever, was just stepping out of the car. As Kay tried to slip past him, he turned, and recognized her immediately.

"Why, Kay!" he exclaimed. His eyes took in the girl's attire. Walter didn't know very much about women's clothes, but he knew this wasn't the Kay whom he had always been ac-

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quainted with, groomed to the eyebrows, and wearing frocks that cost at least five hundred dollars, in the inflated currency of the day.

"Why, Kay, what are you doing here?" Walter asked in astonishment. "What's the trouble?"

"Trouble? There isn't any trouble," replied Kay defiantly.

"Something's the matter," responded Walter with conviction. "Tell me what it is, Kay, and let me help you. What's brought you here like—like this?"

KAY thought swiftly. She was sure that Walter wouldn't abduct her and take her home again. Could she venture to trust him?

"Kay, there's something wrong. Trust me, dear. You know I'm your best friend, don't you?"

Kay decided that she would have to take Walter into her confidence. "Well, it's about that poor fellow, Nils Ericson, who's to be sentenced this morning," she said. "I'm going in to Mineola to see Mr. Gregson, the prosecuting attorney. I'm going to tell him that Nils isn't guilty. I know he'll do something."

"Why, Kay, what do you suppose he can do?" asked Walter. "Now that the jury has brought in its verdict, the whole proceedings become automatic. The only chance lies in a reversal of the verdict by a superior court."

"Oh, Walter, tell me you believe he isn't guilty," said Kay miserably.

Walter Ferrand hadn't the slightest doubt as to the guilt of all three of the men. Nevertheless, he was deeply touched by the sight of beauty in distress.

"If you think he's innocent, that's good enough for me," he answered. "But it's no use trying to see Gregson. He can't do a thing now."

"If you—if you're the friend you've always claimed to be, you'll come in to Mineola with me on this train," said Kay.

"But this train doesn't go to Mineola, Kay. It goes straight into New York."

Kay hadn't thought of that. All her trips to New York had been made by motor-car.

"Then how am I going to get to Mineola?" she asked.

Walter hesitated a moment. But he knew Kay. Never in her life had he known her to be deflected from her purpose.

"I tell you what I'll do," he said. "I'll run you right over in my car, if you feel you must see Gregson. But it won't do you any good, Kay. I do wish you'd give up this idea of yours."

"Let's start," said Kay.

She went round to the other side of the coupé and stepped in. After another instant of hesitation, Walter got in and swung the car around. The next, they were running along the road that went toward the county capital.

The golden dome of the Mineola courthouse came into view, the comet blazing overhead, on the horizon a reddish haze spreading up into the blue. But when they found Gregson's office they were told that he had gone into New York on business.

"But I've got to see him," said Kay. "I'm Miss Enderby, and I've come about that man, Nils Ericson, who's to be sentenced to death this morning."

As she spoke, the inner door opened and a tall man in the uniform of a police officer, with a gilt shield on his chest, stepped out. He was about fifty years of age and looked the picture of ruthless efficiency. He wore a closely

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trimmed black mustache; his eyes probed Kay's relentlessly. It was evident that he had overheard her remark.

"THIS is Captain Garry, the chief of police," said the clerk. "Miss Enderby wanted to see Mr. Gregson about—"

"Yeah, I heard," said Tom Garry. "Them three are going to be sentenced around 11.30. They'll get what's coming to them, don't worry."

It flashed through Kay's mind for the first time that the police chief didn't suspect the motive that had brought her there. Also that, if he did, he would probably do everything he could to prevent her from carrying it out.

"Can't I see the judge?" she asked.

"The judge ain't here yet. Listen, Miss Enderby, you've done your part. The jury's found them guilty, and they're going to the chair. Well, then, what's worrying you?"

"I want to see those men sentenced," said Kay desperately.

Tom Garry scowled and plucked at his mustache. He couldn't make Kay out, but he remembered that she had nearly upset the State's case as regards Ericson. What did she want? Some crazy notion, no doubt. Perhaps had the idea that she could address the judge. He hardened.

"Now, Miss Enderby, seeing three fellers sentenced to the chair ain't in a woman's line," he said. "Nope, you can't go in. I'm sorry, but that's final."

"You see, Kay, you'd better let me drive you home," said Walter Ferrand, outside the building.

Kay turned on him like a fury. "I'm going into that courtroom, Walter," she proclaimed. "A court's a public place, and they can't keep me out."

"Kay, won't you please be reasonable?" pleaded Walter. "You can't go in and make a scene. Why, it would be in all the afternoon papers. I'm sure your father will hire a good lawyer to take the case to the Court of Appeals."

"I'm going in," said Kay. "You'd better go home."

They were arguing near the entrance to the courthouse inclosure. A crowd was swarming about them, staring up at the comet. That curious reddish haze seemed to be spreading up from the horizon. The sun, pale yellow like an enormous golden coin, seemed to have lost half its lustre, though it shone out of an apparently clear sky.

Walter saw Kay's face, white and resolute, in the strange half-twilight that was swiftly coming on. A reddish twilight through which the sun glowed still more dully, silhouetting the mobs against the courthouse and throwing their figures, the motor-cars, the trees into a strange perspective.

An awesome silence had fallen everywhere. Not a movement was discernible in the vast crowds, standing with faces upturned toward the sky. Then a woman shrieked:

"Gawd, it's the Judgment Day!"

And in an instant panic swept through the mob. Instantly it was dissolved into a fighting, screaming, trampling herd. Walter grasped Kay and began fighting his way with her, back into the protection of the building. He got her through the entrance just before it was jammed by the milling crowd.

But there was panic inside, too. White-faced clerks stood trembling in the aisles; men were shouting; women, trapped in the offices, were wailing helplessly. Kay broke from Walter and he followed her flight, calling to her in

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vain, up a flight of stone steps and along a corridor.

Around the bend came another mass of fugitives, racing like stampeding cattle. A squad of police appeared behind them. Walter grasped Kay and swung her through a doorway. They sank down upon a bench inside a large room while clamor filled the corridor outside.

"Lock that door!" somebody was shouting.

Only then did Walter realize that intuition, or destiny, had brought Kay to the courtroom. Impassive in his place the judge was seated. Beneath him three men, guarded by police officers, were waiting to receive the death sentence.

THOUGH it was nearly high noon, the electric lights were on. It had grown almost dark outside, despite that blazing star, and the reddish haze seemed to be spreading inside the courtroom, too. The shouting and screaming in the corridor and about the building made the courtroom a bedlam.

But Kay heard nothing, or, rather, was conscious of nothing save the scene before her. She saw the snarling, crouching form of Antonelli, and Red Lewis, his jaws working as he chewed on a wad of gum. And she saw these two only as accessories to the plight of Nils.

She saw Nils with a shudder of fear, mingled with wonder. He stood between the two crooks, his broad shoulders straightened, his mop of fair hair swept back carelessly from his forehead. It was the look on his face that frightened Kay. It was that of a man-beast, instinct with some terrific, dormant power. She leaned forward, her eyes fixed on his face in fascination.

The judge had begun to speak, but his formal words were drowned by the noise without. And, as if aware that Kay was watching him, Nils slowly turned. For a moment his gaze swept the courtroom. Then it fixed itself on Kay's face.

He knew her. The girl whom he had seen on the witness stand, come to hear him sentenced to the chair!

The darkness was spreading in the courtroom. The electric lights were dimming to candle-power. And, as if through some optical illusion, Walter Ferrand could see only those two faces, the man's and the girl's.

Suddenly Kay was upon her feet, eyes flaming, arms outstretched.

"Nils Ericson is innocent!" she cried. "He wasn't in my father's house that night. He shall not die! You've got to listen to me!"

Tom Garry had come into the courtroom, but in the spreading obscurity he hadn't recognized Kay till she leaped to her feet. Now, face crimsoning with anger, he sprang through the cowering group that had sought for refuge in the room, shouldering them aside.

"Remove that woman!" cried the judge. But his voice sounded tremulous and thin, and now he was no more than a phantom form against the ever increasing darkness.

It happened, then, in a flash. The chained beast broke free. With a bound, Nils Ericson leaped to the courtroom floor, sweeping the police guards aside. Then he was at Kay's side and Kay was swaying toward him; and some protective instinct, stronger than fear, sent her arms around him, to hold him and to shield him.

Walter Ferrand crouched in his place, conscious of his insufficiency, his

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weakness. "Kay! Kay!" he whimpered. He tried to go to her, but Tom Garry brushed past him, flinging him to the ground. The policemen who had been guarding the three prisoners were colliding with one another in the darkness. The electric lights had become mere pin-points—nothing more.

Yet Walter Ferrand could still see the faces of Nils Ericson and Kay Enderby. And that picture of the two was printed upon his brain indelibly before it was dissolved.

That dissolution was instantaneous. One moment there were the man and the girl, Tom Garry, with his pistol at Nils's head, the police officer stumbling forward; the next, everything had dissolved in crashing ruin.

CHAPTER VI.

OUT OF THE RUINS.

NILS ERICSON came back to consciousness with a violently aching head. He tried to put his hand up to it, and discovered that his arm was pinned. He was soaked with warm water, which was still dripping upon him, and falling with monotonous splashes everywhere. Above him was a patch of sunlight, but he was lying in darkness.

His free arm clutched something warm and pliant. It was a living human body. With his other hand he felt a woman's face and hair. And he remembered.

When ruin had fallen on the world, he had still held Kay. Together they had fallen into a bottomless abyss. He remembered Garry's roar of rage, the crack of his pistol. With his last flash of consciousness he had supposed himself shot through the brain.

The comet? Had the comet destroyed the world? He had heard about it in jail, and seen it through the courtroom windows. His guards had jested about it. They had told him it was his only chance of escaping the chair. The world was going to fly into a million bits. Was that what had happened?

But how did it happen that he was lying there with Kay Enderby, and that they were both alive?

He looked about him. His eyes were growing accustomed to the obscurity. He guessed now that it had been an earthquake, and that he was lying amid the ruins of the overthrown courthouse at Mineola. Great masses of stone lay everywhere on all sides of him, and fallen beams. He could feel one of the beams lying across his back. He must have escaped death by a miracle.

But Kay still lived, and, straining his eyes through the gloom, Nils could see her face faintly in the obscurity. She was lying beneath him, her eyes closed, her brown hair caught back in a mass of débris. There was a gash of blood across her forehead.

Nils put his hand upon her breast. He could feel its even rise and fall. She was alive. That was all that mattered. Suddenly the furious berserk instinct came back to him again. He tensed himself where he lay; he drew his body muscles into taut cords. And with a superhuman exercise of strength he forced himself upward against the beam that imprisoned him.

He felt his muscles cracking. But the beam was moving. A great, huge beam that had supported the weigth of one quarter of the courtroom building, it was moving, sliding downward. The sweat streamed down Nils's rain-drenched face. The breath panted from his lungs. One last effort—

The beam slid from his back and

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toppled over with a crash upon the débris beside him. Nils was free.

He could feel the lump upon his aching head where a falling stone had struck him. He could feel the girl who still lay, encircled in his arm. He staggered up, bearing her up with him. He ached in every limb, his body was half numb, but he was free, and no bones were broken.

He swung Kay into his arms and got upon his feet. He stood, swaying, trying to get his balance. He could see much more clearly now. Overhead, above the fallen beams and stones, there was an open space, and from somewhere above the sun was shining. A long ray fell almost at Nils's feet.

Holding Kay, Nils began to scramble up the débris. In places the stones were wedged high above him. He plucked at them and sent them tumbling down. He fought them as his ancestors had fought the inanimate forces of nature. He squeezed his body through gaps that seemed almost impenetrable. But always he was careful of Kay, that no sharp edge should bruise her.

HE was free now. A broken flight of steps lay before him. He made his way up them, and, since the opening above him was wider, he swung Kay over his shoulder.

Panting, bleeding, Nils emerged into what had been one of the basement corridors of the courthouse. A door was in front of him, half-choked with fallen stones. With his right hand Nils plucked them aside. He staggered out into the sunlight.

His first impression was that a wholesale massacre had occurred. The court in front of the ruined building was packed with the bodies of men who had been crushed by the falling stones, and outside these motor-cars were piled up in grotesque heaps. Across the road the buildings had fallen into utter ruin.

Everywhere was devastation, death, no living being.

A lukewarm rain was falling, partly dispersing the wisps of fog that wreathed the ruins, so that the scene wavered before Nils's eyes, now growing almost clear, now vanishing. He stumbled over the crushed and mangled bodies. And once, as he looked up, Nils saw what looked like an enormous sun, almost within arm's grasp; and then he discovered that it was the golden dome of the courthouse, perched in the ruins of the tumbled building.

Everywhere the din had been succeeded by utter silence. Not a single human being seemed to have survived. But as Nils, with Kay across his shoulder, reached the tumble of stones that had been the surrounding wall, he heard a man muttering hoarsely nearby, and stopped, waiting for the next break in the fog.

It came, and he recognized Tom Garry, the police chief. Garry was lying huddled up among the stones, his face covered with blood, and he was apparently still half-unconscious, for the efforts that he was making to disengage himself were weak and futile ones.

Nils stood looking at him, thoughts of vengeance surging through his brain. Suddenly Tom Garry recognized him, and made a new, spasmodic effort to get free. It failed, and he sank back, panting, upon the pile of débris beneath him.

"So you think you've beat the chair, do you, feller," he snarled, "because of the earthquake? Well, you'll find

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out that makes no difference. You're my prisoner!"

He fumbled for his belt, but it was gone, torn from the tattered uniform, and, realizing his helplessness, Garry lay glaring at Nils.

"Well, why don't you bump me off, you dirty, murdering dog?" he snarled. "Who's that girl you got? Put her down! I'll get you yet!"

Suddenly he recognized Kay. He shouted, and struggled so fiercely that he succeeded in dislodging himself, and tumbled down the slope of broken stone, disappearing on the other side. Next moment the fog had shut down again.

With a shrug of his shoulders, Nils turned away and began striding toward the street. Some time he'd settle with Tom Garry, but for the present the score could wait. He heard Garry's frantic yells die away behind him.

Nils saw the line of motor-cars looming up in front of him. Every one of them had either been overturned or crushed by the impact of the falling stones. Nils traveled along the line in the hope of finding one that was intact, but without success. He turned the angle of the building to where another double row of cars had been parked, but here the destruction had been even worse, for the whole side of the courthouse building seemed to have dropped down bodily, burying the cars feet deep in stones and rubble. The road itself had practically disappeared.

NILS beat to and fro for a while, then gave up his search. He could see, in another lifting of the fog, that no tires could hope to negotiate that litter that filled the road.

He picked up Kay again and began clambering over the débris. He turned eastward, in the direction of his father's old farm, without clearly understanding why. But the road to the farm ran past the Enderby estate.

Nils's ears were ringing, but the pain in his head was subsiding and he felt strangely light-footed. He wanted to run and leap, and Kay seemed no heavier than a child. Until he reached the edge of what had been Mineola, which meant a constant clambering over the ruins of the tumbled houses, he supposed that an earthquake, similar to those that had occurred in other parts of the world, had shaken down the town.

Now things looked queerer than even an earthquake could have made them look. First, Nils realized that the comet was no longer in the sky. And the sun, looking like a dull, flattened orange, far down in the west, seemed different, like an enormous harvest moon. And the landscape had changed. for in the west, beyond the chaos of tumbled ground, where Jamaica should have been, was a range of mountain peaks soaring into the sky.

Everywhere lay trees, uprooted, and the fields were pitted with huge holes, as if they had been subjected to an intense bombardment. Here and there, dipping among them, were the remnants of what had been roads.

East of Mineola great blocks of concrete, that had formed the bed of the Jericho Turnpike, were tossed up into an almost impassable barrier. Nils took to the fields beside the remnants of the road, threading his way along the ridges between the holes.

He set Kay down and looked at her. She was breathing regularly, but she was still unconscious. He examined the injury to her head, wiping away the blood that still oozed from her forehead. The bone beneath it did not seem to be fractured.

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Even now, Nils had not decided where he was going. His mind was still confused, and a burning thirst tormented him. There was no water anywhere, though the lukewarm drizzle was still descending. Nils turned northward. That was the direction of his farm.

All at once he came upon a pond of water, escaping on every side above the brimming banks. He set Kay down, flattened himself upon his stomach, and drank eagerly. He made a cup of his hands and poured some of the fluid into Kay's mouth.

SHE stirred, she opened her eyes, she looked into Nils's face and shuddered. She knew him.

"Where am I? What has happened?" she whispered.

"The world's come to an end, I guess," Nils answered hoarsely. "Mineola's a ruin. Maybe New York's gone, too." New York was the world to Nils. If that had gone, the world had certainly been destroyed.

"They're all dead, crushed under the falling stones," Nils went on. He had forgotten Tom Garry for the moment. "You and me are the only humans left alive, I guess."

And suddenly he realized that this girl was his, that his wild dream had come true. They were alone in a world of the dead. A world for him to master. Kay saw the sombre flicker in his eyes. She cried out faintly.

"Take me home," she pleaded, "even if they're all dead. Oh, take me home! Promise me! Didn't I come to the court to-day to plead for you?"

Nils didn't answer her. Perhaps he hardly heard her. That brooding dream possessed him. He had come into his own. Kay and a dead world to be explored, dominated, whether other human beings still remained alive or no.

But there were others. A group of six men, lurking in a patch of scrub beside the pond, watching him like wolves. Six men who seemed to have reverted to the primeval type of man, with snarling, bestial faces. Three of them were bareheaded, three wore soft hats or caps mushroomed down upon their heads. Their clothing, sodden from the rain, was stained black with mud and hung and flapped about them. Their leader signaled, and they leaped out, shouting.

"All you got!" yelled the foremost. "Come across with it, leave the girl, and scram!"

Nils sprang to meet the rush. A revolver cracked; the bullet whined past his ear. His big fists flailed mercilessly. Three of the six went down before the impact. Then Nils was in the middle of the rest, grappling with them, knocking their heads together, leaving them stunned and helpless, while the other three took flight, stumbling over the pitted ground, bawling in terror.

Nils went back and raised Kay in his arms again. Suddenly it was growing dark. A minute or two before a shaft of sunlight had pierced the fog. Now darkness was dropping from the heavens like a cloak.

The moon, which should have lit up the skies, seemed to have vanished, like the comet.

Then of a sudden a host of brilliant stars came out, lighting the dark landscape that stretched away on every side.

Kay was relapsing into unconsciousness. But, as she felt Nils's arms about her, she muttered plaintively:

"Take me home! I came—to plead for you!"

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Some feeling, strange to Nils, stirred in his heart. Was it her helplessness? Something that was stronger than his desire to take her for his own. A moan came from his lips.

"Take me home. Promise me!"

"I'll—take you—home!"

She heard, and she relaxed, a dead weight in his arms. Clasping her to him, Nils strode on into the night with her. And then a laugh of self-mockery broke from his lips.

He laughed bitterly into the night as he strode onward, holding Kay in his arms, and feeling her rain-splashed hair sweeping his face.

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK.

Wampum, the Dutch Currency

CONTRARY to popular belief, wampum was not originally Indian money. The purple and white shell beads, used so extensively in Colonial times along the New England coast, in New York State, Pennsylvania, New Jersey and Canada, were first manufactured by the Dutch and served as the only form of currency in the little colony of New Netherlands for over seventy years.

The reason for this was that the motherland would not allow the Dutch colonists to have any small silver currency, alleging that if silver was sent to the New World it would speedily find its way into the pockets of the English and French to the detriment of Dutch interests. As a result, the special type of shell beads were made and used not only among the Dutch themselves, but in trade with the Indians, English, and French.

These beads were made from two kinds of shell, the quahaug or hard clam and the periwinkle. The purple, or "black" wampum was the most valuable.

Laws were passed prohibiting the counterfeiting of this odd currency in horn, bone, stone, mussel shell, glass and wood.

In 1627 the Dutch sold fifty pounds' worth of the stuff to the English in Massachusetts, thereby introducing wampum to the Indians of that section of the coast. However, the English did not succeed in disposing of this amount of the shell beads to the Indians for almost two years.

About 1770 a wampum factory was established at Pascack, Bergen County, New Jersey, by Robert Campbell. This factory flourished until well into the nineteenth century. Wampum was still in circulation as a medium of exchange among the farmers of New Jersey as late as 1844.

Now, the true purple and white wampum beads are extremely scarce. Very few private collectors have any of the genuine wampum. Glass beads, stone beads, and other shell beads are not wampum.

In time the use of wampum spread among many of the Iroquois and Algonquian tribes. They used it principally as a mnemonic reminder and to preserve accounts of treaties, deeds, etc. Belts and strings were made and used ceremonially, and one American officer in 1792 said, "To attempt to talk with an Indian without wampum is like going to a lawyer without a fee."

Arthur Woodward.

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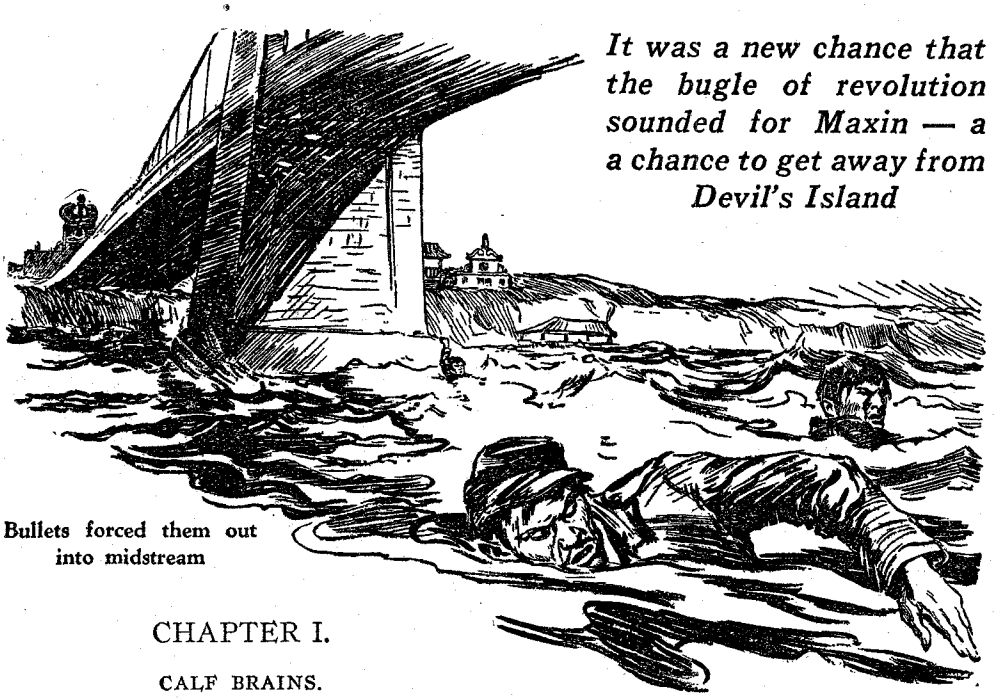
The Bugle Calls

By ROBERT CARSE

Author of "King Mob," "The Ship," etc.

Novelette—Complete

It was a new chance that the bugle of revolution sounded for Maxin — a a chance to get away from Devil's Island



Bullets forced them out into midstream

CHAPTER I.

CALF BRAINS.

THE comber rose behind them, frothing as it swung. Maxin, who sat 'midships in the dugout, let out a wild shout of warning, and they drove their paddles deep just as the lipping downfall of the comber rushed beneath them. With that impetus, the dugout surged forward again, rocking, shipping water dangerously as it struck the bubbling recoil on the beach.

Then, with an abrupt sickening sensation, the last of the comber slicked back, and the dugout dropped heavily into the black, soft ooze.

"Come on! Quick!" Maxin croaked it swiftly, scrambling to his knees 'midships. "She'll sink here, in a minute."

His hands gripped on the charred gunwale, he jumped overside, into the mud. The stuff clasped closely at his knees and his thighs, rose as high as his waist, then his chest. He struggled through it with his head back, panting with the exertion, his hands finding beneath the surface the rotted roots of old mangrove trees which had once stood here. Thus he came to where there was solid ground under his bare feet; reeled free from the last of the ooze, and fell prone upon the grass-hummocked shore. Dimly he heard the muttered cries and the noisy progress of his companions behind him as they too broke forth to safety.

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Slowly, Maxin turned to look at them. They were all out now, and had slid down upon the grass hummocks or upon the twisting, snake-like roots of the mangroves.

Huada, the scar-faced Arab, sat closest to him. He was clawing the slime from his arms and body; Maxin could see the big black characters of the man's prison serial number as he cleared off his canvas shirt.

The Arab's dark, small eyes swerved towards him as he felt Maxin's glance. a knife in his fingers, taken from its cord about his neck. "You hear me?—Come here! *Now!*"

"Yes—yes." Maxin mumbled it hurriedly, rising up and stumbling forward over the grass hummocks. "I just wanted to rest a bit, Huada."

"Yes?" Huada had put back the knife. "But as I heard the story, you rested here once before . . . And they came along and picked you up—shot you right back to the prisons, within two days . . ." His head swung,

"Come over here, Calf Brains. Be sociable!"

Maxin shook his head, indicating the other two men; Rassini, the squat and hairy Sardinian, and Duplaix, the thin, stooped, button-eyed gangster from Lyons. Those two sat together, and perhaps fifteen yards away, stretched out upon a tangle of mangrove roots, their hands crossed over their blistered faces to keep off the gnats and flies.

"No. Let's take it easy, Huada.—Like those guys are doing. We're all right here. Nobody's going to bother us, and it'll be night soon."

The Arab made a laughing sound. One of his hands had groped down inside his canvas shirt, and now he held towards the other two men. "You guys hear what I just said?"

Rassini mumbled forth a long, deep-throated oath. He and Duplaix were getting up, moving in their direction. "We heard, yes . . . How about it, Maxin? You're the bird who piloted us into this place. And it's true that this is just where they picked you up, isn't it?"

Rapid and unreasoning anger seared in Maxin's brain. His eyes blinked as he stared around at them, and his hands tightened upon his knees.

"Listen!" The words broke from him almost incoherently. "I've managed this whole thing. I got the money to buy the canoe and the food; I even showed you lads how to get

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away from the camp and past the guards at night; and how to cross over the Maroni to the Dutch side. And if—"

He broke off.

TALL Duplaix had advanced towards him. One of the gangster's long, sinewy hands had gripped his arm, was twisting it up, painfully high behind his back. There was a strangely pleased grin on his hollow, pimply face.

"Don't you like it, Calf Brains? What do you want us to do—write you out a signed testimonial of thanks? Sure, you put up the money and showed us how to slide out of the place. But who paddled your rotten canoe? Could you have got here alone? You want to go on—a l o n e—now?—Or maybe you'd like Huada's knife making our initials on your ribs? Be still about that stuff, then! And answer Rassini his question, like a nice, polite little boy!"

Maxin ran his sore tongue over his lips. A cold sweat of fear was running down into his eyes. He looked away from them and up at the lead-gray sky, where several big black vultures were now beginning to sweep and circle above the mangroves and palmettos.

"Yes," his voice was just above a whisper. "It was right here where they picked me off, eight years ago . . . Rond and I landed here. Just about the same way we came in now. But we had a tougher trip that time; we had gales and head winds all the way along the coast. Even then, though, we thought we'd passed the end of British Guiana and were over the border to the West . . ."

His voice died away. He sat still, listening dully to their breathing and his own.

"Go on!" muttered Rassini. "Tell us!"

He stared up at them, his hands working over each other against his bare stomach. He nodded.

"Sure. I will. But it's pretty hard to tell. We were off our heads—I was, anyway—from all the hard work, the rowing, and the bailing. And we ran out of food. Most of it was washed over the side on the second night, and the rest went bad. Next, we ran out of drinking water. So, when we got here, I was kind of nuts . . ."

He paused once more; but only briefly. When he went on, his voice had deepened several notes.

"You guys don't know Rond. He was before your time in the prisons; he was before you came out to Guiana. Well, he's a strong man and a big man. He was a soldier once—an officer in the regular army—and tough. He got up the beach here first. Through the mud. I came after him. But I passed out as soon as I got here. It seems he didn't. Anyway, he got back into the bush, where he was safe; and when I came to, with those bush niggers shaking me, he was gone. I was all alone here. I tried to talk to them, those two blacks. I said I'd give them the canoe and my knife; and, if they'd wait, I'd get them money."

Huada laughed. "But they took merely your knife, and the canoe, and they thought you were lying about getting them any money . . . So they took you down to Georgetown and turned you in to the cops, huh?"

"Yes." Maxin let the words rush out now. "They did just that. They got fifty francs, for turning me in. And I got two and a half years in silence, on Isle Joseph, for that. I've had to serve eight years more, all told, before I could even get back here

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again.—Rond got away; he ducked me. He let me get sent back.—Rond, who was a stronger guy than I was, and who at least could have pulled me back into the bush with him. Now, Rond's a big guy. He's—"

"SHUT up!" barked Rassini. "We know that. Rond's got the idea he's wise. He didn't try to slide back into France, or even to New York. He's stayed right on this coast, down country, here. He's turned honest, and he's fooled some of those dumb breeds into making him a captain in their tin-pot army. Well, just wait until he meets us! We'll fix him up for the job he did on you, Calf Brains . . . He thinks he's safe, because he's changed his name, and has got a little power. Maybe he's forgotten the 'grapevine' telegraph works. Why, even in the prisons we've heard about him. He'll pay, the dog! He'll pay plenty; and what he pays will get us away, and north, into Panama or Mexico, where an escaped lad has a real chance of being safe and can find something nice and soft to turn his hands to . . . So, come on! Get up! You said there's supposed to be a trail here, Calf Brains. You know where?"

Maxin sat still. His eyes were shut, and there was a wide smile on his face. He seemed like a man in a dream.

Duplaix kicked him roughly. "Cut out your dreaming about the vengeance you'll get out of Rond! Snap up, on your feet! Where's the trail?"

Maxin stumbled up, twitching his eyes and mumbling, his thin, slight shoulders drawn protectively in towards his head. "Right back there. That's where it was supposed to be, eight years ago, when Rond and I were here. It's supposed to lead back, and to that river; then it meets another trail, and that one cuts across a corner of the border. Then a man is safe. For over there, they don't bother much about sending escaped lads back—unless the French consul asks it—because the fifty francs they get for doing it doesn't much more than pay for bringing 'em into town . . ."

He had spoken in a loud, rapid voice; but after the first few words none of the other three men had listened to him. Rassini had just come across the first signs of the faint, little-used trail, and with great jerks of his hands he was pulling back the lianas, leaves and branches which masked it. He turned around when he stood squarely upon the trail, Huada and Duplaix beside him.

"Hurry up, you, Maxin!" he called roughly. "This is no Sunday promenade in the park! Move your stumps and get in here!"

"Yes!" answered Maxin hoarsely. "Yes, right away!"

He was running forward to join them, stumbling and all but tripping over the rough ground. They stood and laughed at him until he had come up to them. Then, in silence, they rapidly struck away down the dark narrowness of the trail, their eyes straining nervously ahead into the gloom.

CHAPTER II.

MONKEYS IN UNIFORM.

WHERE they were, the green, almost ripe cane rose maskingly above their heads. Behind them bulked the vast, black wall of the jungle which they had just left and through which they had toiled, fevered, hungry and nearly half dead, for more than a month. In front of them, beyond a thin screen of palmettos and scrub

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along the edges of the cane fields, lay the low, Spanish-built town.

Brought to them upon the slow night breeze, they could hear the barking of dogs, the lowing of cattle, the high, clattering voice of a woman, the faint tinkling of a guitar played in some roadside *botaquin,* the sputtering roar of an automobile motor, then the rich, deep resonance of the old Spanish bells ringing in the cathedral tower.

"Sounds good," whispered Rassini, the Sardinian. He had broken off a piece of the green cane and was sucking at it with loud, eager noises. "There's women in there, and booze, and food . . . I think I'll get to like that town . . ."

Rassini was the only man to stand; the others lay or sat in the cane, spent by their month of jungle marching, or racked by the after effects of the fever. Rassini was the one man who seemed to have come through practically unharmed. He had once served as a corporal in the Foreign Legion, and had seen service in Indo-China and Madagascar, where, he had boasted during the last few weeks, he had learned to throw the fever off like you would throw off a shirt. He looked down at the other three now. He smiled at them, jeering in his coarse French:

"A fine collection of mugs! . . . Me, I got drunk and sold a few uniforms and bits of equipment to some lads in Pnom-Penh, and they sentenced me to a 'seven-and-a-seven' in Guiana. Old Huada, there, he get busted out of the Camel Corps for being drunk, and then he almost starves. So he breaks into some guy's house in Algiers and steals the guy's pants and watch, and two thousand francs. The guy wakes up, and don't like it, so Huada gives him the knife. For which the coppers gave Huada a clean 'twenty' in Guiana."

Still the man he had described kept silent, prone in the cane.

Rassini laughed aloud at him, and went on. "You, you dirty camel, Duplaix. You're just a common, gutter crook; you've always stolen, and you always will. They put you in the *Bat' d'Afrique,* but even that didn't do you any good; you stole again as soon as you finished up and got back to France. So they gave you the *'perpétuité'* to Guian'. Which was a good thing . . . As for you, Calf Brains, you were just too honest and too stupid to be alive. Your bosses made a monkey out of you up in Paris. When your company went broke, the books read that you, instead of the real guys, had been doing the crooked work. So the judges wrote you out a nice little ticket to Guiana, and you even lacked the guts to get up in court and tell them who the fellows were who had put the frame on you . . . But I don't think you even hate them as much as you hate Rond.—Huh, Calf Brains?"

A shivering ran through Maxin's narrow, slight body. He made a jerky movement, as if he were about to get to his feet. "No," he croaked the word out. "You're right about that.—But, shut up, will you? Let us rest a bit; that last day almost killed me."

"Shut up, nothing!" Rassini stooped down over him, gripped him by the shoulder and tugged him upright. "We're going into town—all of us—right now. And we're going to get as close to the main plaza as we can. Then you're going to go up to the barracks and find some way of meeting Rond. You speak a little Spanish. I've heard you speak it, back in the jug. And you can find some way of sending Rond a note, warning him and telling him to meet you, wherever you tell him to. He'll come, all right. If he doesn't to-

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morrow morning we send a note around to the French consulate, telling that guy just who Rond is—an escaped lifer from Devil's Island, a guy who mutinied against his colonel's orders, out in Syria. The guys who run the jugs back in Cayenne will be pretty happy to have Rond on their Devil's Island again; they'll pay for him, all right . . . But that talk can wait now. What we want to do is have you find Rond.—Come on! Move!"

HE kicked and cursed at the other two, still holding Maxin's shoulder, and they also swayed up to their feet, groped along behind toward the edges of the cane. They straightened and tautened, all of them, when they stood free of that protection. But Huada laughed, bringing out his knife and brushing the point of the blade across the grease-slick cloth of his trouser leg. "No guy here is going to send me back to that place. I've come too far, now . . . Step lively, Rassini!"

They walked quickly, going in single file, Rassini leading, Maxin next, between the Sardinian and Duplaix, and Huada coming last. They strode through coarse grass which tangled about their feet and the torn legs of their trousers. Then they came to a muddy little path, and strode along that. It led them right past a row of lopsided, foul smelling *parajace* huts where a blank-faced Indian woman paddled forth to gawp at them and dogs ran forward to snuff and bark at their heels. But, they did not stop; they even increased their pace.

The path ended in wide, flat square with a stone-walled well in the center, and low, adobe or wooden-framed houses flanking it. There was a *botaquin* on one side, and from it poured music and the sound of voices.

"If I only had dough for a drink!" muttered Duplaix.

Rassini turned, swiftly. "If you had dough for a drink, witless, I'd take it from you! Step out; there's a copper over there, by that drinking joint . . . Hop it—for that alley!"

The alley was narrow, tortuous, absolutely black; it stank of a thousand smells. They piled into it at the full run, bumped blindly through it, stopping at the other end to look hurriedly back. "It's all right," husked Huada. "He's still there, by the joint; he hasn't moved."

"Yeah. I can see, too!" Rassini whispered it from where he stood at the end of the alley; and as he spoke, he turned, looking out into the plaza it gave upon. Obviously, it was the main plaza of the town. Directly opposite them was the cathedral, the bells of which they had heard while out in the cane. On either side were shops and cafés, the shops closely shuttered and dark now, but the cafés wide open and noisy with life. Opposite the cathedral, and at the far end of the plaza, was a big, square, pillared structure made of dark stone. Its windows were lighted; men moved quickly up and down its steps, and there were cars parked along the sidewalk fronting it.

"The *cuartel*," said Duplaix softly. "The town hall and jug . . . Say, there's a lot of monkeys in uniform around this dump. Look!—Over there." He jerked a thumb forward in indication, but all of them were already craning forward to watch.

A SQUADRON of cavalry, lancers on small, shaggy horses, had just come forth at a jog-trot into the plaza. The officer who led them wheeled his horse around and called a sharp order. Spurs jingled and leather

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squeaked as the troopers dismounted, stood at the heads of their animals, lances in hand.

"Not so bad," said Rassini, in a laughing whisper. "They all got off the right side of the horse, anyhow . . . Here comes some of their infantry."

It was a column of perhaps battalion strength. The men were dressed in badly fitting khaki uniforms and were bare-footed, but they marched with some degree of order and snap, and they were under full pack and shouldered modern high-power rifles.

"Two more guys," continued Rassini, "and they'll have the whole army out there. And one of those two ought to be this guy Rond."

Beside him, Maxin gulped and made a laughing sound. He raised a hand which he could not keep steady and pointed, toward the officer who was commanding the debouching movements of the infantry.

"You called that right. See the tall guy in the red pants, with the sword? That's Rond!"

"Huh?" Rassini pushed his face close in, and the other two jostled against his stiffening arms. "What do you mean? Which one? The big mug?"

"Yes. That's Rond . . . He's got a beard, and a mustache now. But I'd know that map aywhere . . ."

He was silent, and the others stood looking at him, waiting for him to speak. But he did not. A grip of hysterical rage or fright seemed to have taken hold of him, to lock his body and his brain. He remained motionless, and stiff, following with his eyes the movements of the man he had pointed out as Rond.

Rassini spoke. "Listen, Calf Brain—And listen good. It looks to me like this outfit just got into town from the march. And it looks like they're going to station them right here in the plaza. —If that guy is Rond, then Rond seems to be handling the job of showing 'em where to billet around the place. In a few minutes, they'll have sentries posted, and you'll have a tough time getting to him. But not just yet. Not now. Now, you can just walk right out. Your clothes are all torn up, and with those bare stumps of yours, and with that mat of hair on your face and head, you look more like a bush runner than you do like any escaped man from French Guiana.

"So you go right up to him and talk to him. He'll talk to you, all right, and he'll be good and certain to pull you off to some place where you can talk alone . . . You know what to say. If he gets hard, just tell him we're around town, where he can't find us. And if you don't come back in an hour, the French consul gets the tip-off about who he really is. If he's sensible and wants to play along and help us out, then you can fix it up with him to meet us somewhere—alone, and no fooling about it . . . Now, get going! Move!"

"No!" Maxin tried to shake his head. "No. Wait!"

"No?" Huada laughed, saying it, his knife point against Maxin's spine. "Go, you dog! Go—now—or we'll break every bone in your back!"

They pushed him then, roughly, and he made a sobbing, breathless sound as he stumbled forward.

CHAPTER III.

A SERVICE OFFER.

ON the cobbles in the center of the plaza a detail of infantrymen were making a big cooking fire. Rond stood beside it, watching its construction and kindling, his wizened and

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ape-like Indian bugler at his shoulder. It was the bugler who called out in his bad Spanish and made Rond aware of Maxin's presence.

Rond swung. "*Si,*" he said softly. "I see him; let him come on. Go and bring him right here. He is a man I once knew."

Maxin continually looked at the bugler as he advanced, for that man had opened his holster and drawn forth a big, flat automatic which he carried suggestively at his hip. Before he spoke to Maxin, Rond cursed the bugler, telling him to put up the side-arm. Then, softly and calmly, he addressed Maxin in French, and held out his gauntleted hand to him in greeting.

"It's you, hey? I am very glad to see you . . . Have no fear. Say anything you want. These lads don't speak French, and most of them don't even speak much Spanish. When did you get out? How did you get here?"

Maxin had not taken the taller man's hand, and he had drawn his own hands tightly back against his sides. He stood perhaps three paces from Rond, his head pulled a bit forward, his eyes wide and staring, an uneven jerk of breathing coming through his locked teeth. He spoke only after an extreme effort, and then indistinctly.

"Last month we got out. From one of the upper camps. We just got here . . . You—you—!" He could not go on; he seemed to be choking.

Rond slowly nodded. His voice was calm, and level. "I had to leave you, lad. When we landed on that beach I was all but dead, too. I tried to carry you, but, that was too much . . . I had to drop you. Then I heard them coming—those two blacks—along the trail; and I crawled up into the brush. I fainted when I got there, I guess. Because when I came to again it was night and you were gone. The canoe was gone, too, and there were footprints in the mud, where they had carried you out to the canoe and pushed off in it . . ."

He paused, studying the other man, his own body quietly relaxed, his hands loosely cupped over the broad leather of his sword belt. Then, seeing that Maxin did not want to speak, obviously wished him to go on speaking, he continued in that same soft voice:

"It was luck for me, there. And bad luck for you. My luck stayed with me, and got better—for the first time in my life. I got through, this far. A little border war against some of the Indian tribes was going on, and they were taking almost anybody in the army, here. I joined up, immediately, with no questions asked. Soldiering is about the only job I know. They made me a noncom, then a lieutenant; and a captain, when the skipper of my outfit got knocked off, up in the bush. Now—But, let's talk about you. What can I do for you, here?"

Maxin laughed, his body and his hands trembling. "Do?" It was a broken, throaty whisper. "For me? I'll tell you what you can do for me! After what you did back there, when you left me to be caught, sent back to eight years more of that place. I'm not alone here. No. Three other lads came with me. Real tough boys. And we know all about you, and your 'luck.' That's our luck, now. We're on our way out, north—to Panama and Mexico. But we're broke. And we want to make a loan—from you. You're an old *bagnard*—an escaped convict—just like us. So we thought you'd understand it if we asked you for a little loan.—Say ten thousand pesos—to take us north. If not, of course, there's the French consul here, and he'd be

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very glad to hear that there is an ex-captain of the French Colonial Army who was sentenced to Devil's Island for mutiny but is now serving under an assumed name in this tin-pot army. You understand, *capitan?*"

ROND did not smile. He lifted one hand in a slow gesture to his shoulder and tapped his new, broad epaulette.

"*Colonel* now," he corrected. "No longer captain. I've come up in the world, and since this afternoon, friend . . . But, this is pretty rough talk you've been giving me. It doesn't sound just like you, Maxin—not as I knew you. It sounds like some stuff that has been fixed up by the mugs who escaped with you from that place. But that doesn't matter much . . ."

He smiled now, hooking his thumbs back into his belt. ("I've got a lot of work to do; we're pretty busy around here tonight. So I'll be quick with you. You can't frighten me, Maxin; you can't blackmail me with any foolish talk like that. And I'll tell you just why you can't. There's a revolution going on here. It started this noon. One man, a rotten crook and a despot, has been running this country for over twenty years, and bleeding it to death. Now we're going to take it from him. All these troops here are in the new revolutionary army. I'm a colonel in that army. And so it would seem that you picked the wrong time to approach me like this. If we win—if we get our own government in power—there will be no extradition law which will permit a government like France to drag me back to Devil's Island. If we lose, I'll have nothing and I'll care about nothing. I'll clear out of here for anywhere . . . You understand? But I like you, Maxin. You and I were partners in escape, at one time. I know what you're up against now, you and your pals, and I know the desperation which forces you to try to pull such a thing as this on me . . ."

His voice died slowly. He swung to look at the sleeping, lounging men, and past them at the steadily marching sentries, the quick-moving groups of the food and water details, the flow of movement and light upon the steps of the *cuartel.* Then he swung back at Maxin, and his voice had a deep, new timbre in it.

"We're marching at dawn. This town and the port are ours. We're going to go inland and take the other towns and the capital, up in the mountains . . . We'll probably be in action by tomorrow noon, at the latest. You understand what I'm trying to say, what I'm trying to offer you?"

"No." Maxin pushed the word forth stiffly, his teeth barely parting.

Lines deepened between Rond's dark, wide-set eyes. "I'll tell you more clearly, then! I'm offering you and your pals berths in the new army—fighting with me. You've been a soldier; you served in the infantry in the World War—even if they did have to draft you. How about those mates of yours? Have they seen service?"

"All of them." Muscles twitched in Maxin's gauntly haggard face. "But I don't think they escaped from the place to come here and take a chance of being killed, fighting for a few *pesos* a day . . ."

"No? Well, you can tell them from me that unless they do they're liable to starve, or be put against a wall by any wandering detachment of troops they meet out in the bush. And it would be more than 'a few *pesos* a day.' If they're good men—if they fight well, and we win—I'll see that all of you re-

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ceive eight hundred *pesos,* gold, a month; and afterward permanent berths as noncoms, or officers, in the new army. Go get them; tell them all that, now. I offer you that one chance. Take it, or leave it! You understand?"

"Yes," said Maxin in a low, husky voice. He was backing away from Rond and out of the play of the firelight. "Yes, Rond. I'll—I'll—they'll probably come back with me."

ROND was still there by the fire, a big, lank-haired Indian sergeant standing at attention behind him, when Maxin came back. The other three men were padding silently and nervously after Maxin, their dark eyes staring incessantly from side to side. Sweat dripped from Maxin's delicate featured face; his eyes had a wild, staring look. Watching him keenly, Rond realized that the little man had just been through a great deal, back there in the shadows on the other side of the plaza, in his attempt to convince these companions of his that they should at least come to meet him, Rond.

Rond spoke, using the sharp, clear voice of command. "Halt! Right there! Line up, side by side."

They did so; Maxin swiftly, the rest slowly and sullenly.

Rond strode to stand before them, his body erect, his hands straight by his sides. "You?" he asked, staring into Huada's slit eyes, "You've served before—back there?"

A corner of Huada's mouth came back. "So. *Mehariste, première classe,* Camel Corps."

Rond nodded, in silence. He was standing before Rassini now. "You look like the Legion to me. That's Legion-style tattooing on your chest. Right?"

"Right!" Rassini growled it. "Senior corporal, one time. But—"

"I know! There's that 'but' for all of us, here.—All that doesn't matter, now.—How about you, Long Legs? Where did you serve, and why?"

Duplaix let forth a loose, shrill cackle of laughter. With a jerk of his bullet head, he indicated a bawdy, insulting legend, tattooed on the bicep of his skinny arms. "In the 'Zephyrs'—*Bataillon d'Afrique.* They used to think I was a naughty boy, at home . . ."

Rond nearly smiled. "I wouldn't be surprised," he said quickly, "if they were right . . . But, enough of that. Maxin, here, has told you what I told him?—All of it? Good, then. That makes it simpler. For we're all the same—you and me, too—all escaped convicts—lads who went to the place for one reason or another. We've all soldiered before, for France, and now we have to soldier, here. So—"

He halted abruptly, swinging his head, his body stiffening still more. A cavalry squadron bugler had just clattered down the steps of the *cuartel.* At the bottom step the man halted, heels meeting, head back, the bugle straight in his brown hand. The notes tumbled forth, clear, shrill, thrilling. The sleeping men grunted, turned over, rose as their noncoms and officers called orders. There was the thud of packs being hoisted into place, the clack of equipment buckles, the musical banging of rifle butt-plates against stone.

Rond was smiling as he looked back at the four men in front of him. "You understand me now? You've heard the bugle call, you old soldiers? Do you go? Do you fight for me—and for yourselves? Speak up!"

They spoke, in a rough, grunted chorus. His smile widened as he heard them.

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He spun on his heel, calling an order in swift Spanish to the big sergeant behind. "All right!" He had swung again to them. "Go with that sergeant—quickly. He'll issue you uniforms, rifles, equipment. Report back here to me when you're done. Make it snappy! Come on—in twenty minutes, now, we march!"

CHAPTER IV.

BETTER THAN SOME.

DOWN the trail, heavy-duty machine guns were racketing a cross fire through the trees and brush; so Rond knelt in front of them, his big horse pulled to its knees behind him. Rond's face was deeply lined, unshaven. His eyes were bloodshot with strain and sleeplessness. His carefully cut uniform was spotted and torn, grimed with the traces of the constant fighting and marching of the last ten days.

He ran his eyes over the four of them in front of him now: Maxin, Rassini and the other two, who, eleven days before, had joined with him in the "Army of Freedom."

They, too, were weary and dirty; their eyes and muscles twitched as an occasional leaf or twig, clipped by the machine gun enfilade, dropped down upon them from the foliage overhead. Rond laughed aloud as he watched them.

"A fine pack of slackers, all four of you! You took the chance with me. You gave me your words to fight like men, like soldiers. You even took the uniforms, the rifles—and food. Yet in every bit of action we've had since we've left the coast, you've held back, among the stragglers, you've ducked out somewhere until it was over.—You!" He said the last word as though it were a curse.

"I could have you shot right now, for what you have done. You've seen these other men die, these *Indios* from the hills and the big plantations, men who have marched hundreds of miles to come here, and who really fight and die for what they know as freedom . . . They're in earnest about this; they're willing to take a chance—to die for what they have promised. But not you, you swine!"

His voice halted, broke. He brushed one hand across his face and his eyes. Then again his voice lashed at them:

"I'd like to shoot you for what you have done.—But not yet. I'll give you one more chance. Once, back in Syria, I was supposed to face a firing squad, for refusing the orders of a colonel who was mad with the idea of personal glory—mad enough to send me and my outfit out on a suicidal job. But that man had the courage, when I'd refused him, to go alone. He died. He got his glory. And I missed the firing squad, in exchange for a sentence to Devil's Island, when the big mugs decided that a colonel's glory should be given greater credit than a captain's honesty . . . All of which brings me right back to you, you yellow-bellied rats!"

He turned, and with his outstretched, steady hand, he pointed down the trail up which he and his army of barefooted Indian irregulars had stubbornly fought the night before. Then he swerved his darkly burning eyes to their taut faces again.

"You know the big bridge we crossed, down there last night? It's the one railroad bridge going up to the capital; the only way the regular troops between here and the coast can get up speedily to help defend the town.

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Well, we can't hold that bridge; we need every man for the attack on the capital. So the bridge is going to go. And you're the ones who are going to send it.—Yes, you—with dynamite . . . You understand me? And that's your last chance!"

Crouched, he came up from his knees, pulled a whistle from his tunic pocket by its chain, blew a blast upon it.

A small smile formed about his eyes and mouth as he received and returned the salute of the young lieutenant who had come in answer to the whistle sound; the smile widened as he spoke in Spanish to the lieutenant. He wheeled then, talked to them again in French:

"That man's going for the stuff, the dynamite and battery wire. Those other guys have got their machine guns set up at the far end of the bridge, and they're covering it. You'll find it plenty hot when you get down beneath, at the bottom of the bridge supports. But there's lots of rocks on the bank on this side; they'll cover you up until you're actually in the water. Then you can duck in behind the supports themselves. I've ordered four bunches of dynamite —two for each support. Any one of you, and all of you, know how to do that job; it's a simple thing. If you don't—remember what I just told you! —Here it is. Take it! And move!"

MAXIN was behind Rassini, and the second one out onto the ragged, brush-covered lip of the sharp bluff overlooking the spate of the river. A film of sweat blinded his eyeballs, so that he could hardly see the sweep of the great concrete and steel bridge, perhaps fifty feet upstream from where they now crouched. His whole body shook with a nausea of nervousness; the bunch of dynamite sticks he held almost slipped from his hands.

But Huada, who was just behind him, kicked him savagely and whispered:

"Get on! Down the bank! Follow Rassini! That guy Rond is back there, covering us; he'll plug us unless we move. And those guys at the other end of the bridge will see us in a minute! Slide down, on your back!"

Gasping, clutching the dynamite tight against his chest, Maxin slid, down through the last of the brush, then in the middle of a small avalanche of shale and stones Rassini had begun before him. Bullets cracked the bank about him. But he did not hear them; did not see the men who fired them; heard nothing but the beating of his heart and saw nothing but the bulky shape of Rassini, now sprawled behind a big boulder at the edge of the roaring river.

Rassini was wounded. Maxin saw that as he skidded to rest beside him behind the boulder; blood was spurting from the man's shoulder, putting a bright stain upon the khaki of his tunic.

"Rassini," Maxin said in a gulping whisper, "listen. I've got a first-aid pack, here, and—"

"Shut up!" Duplaix clipped him a flat-handed blow on the side of the head. "Rond's still up there, watching, with a gun trained on us. He'll shoot, unless we go ahead. Get out there, Rassini; you're all right—yet!"

They went swiftly, one after the other, their bodies bent over the deadly little bunches of the dynamite. Bullets hailed above them, at them, around them. Then the cold clasp of the water caught strongly at their bodies, almost sucking them under. They gasped, going into it shoulder-deep, pushing

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desperately against the current, and upstream toward the broad white pillars of the bridge supports.

Somehow, all of them reached the safety of that first support. They clung there, too spent to curse, clearly hearing the bullets from the machine guns on the other bank as they nicked in ricochet from the concrete and tore through the water beyond.

"So!" rasped Huada. "This is what your old friend, Rond, has got us into now, Maxin . . . Those mugs on the other bank know just what we're after; and right now they're making a big job to fight clear across the bridge, right over our heads. But that's only funny; because you're the only one of us who is going to go out any further than here. Yes, you get that honor; we hand it to you. Don't worry—and don't hesitate—we'll drown you, right here, unless you . . ."

Maxin screamed, and tried to hold to the water-smoothed corners of the concrete. But they yelled, cursing back at him, tore his fingers loose, jammed the rest of the dynamite and the loose coils of wire inside his tunic, pushed him into the stream and out into that frothing slap of bullets from the other bank.

He screamed once more then, as he took his second stride and a bullet ripped flame through the muscles of his left arm. He slipped, floundered, went down, head under, came up gasping. The sweep of the current had dragged and spun him. He was now yards away from the protection of the pillar he had left. There was just that other pillar, the second one in the line. Toward that he lunged, in a frenzy of fearful motion, half swimming, half walking, his body and his head nearly submerged. Then, before he consciously knew it, he was in against the second pillar and clinging to it, incapable of anything but just staying there.

HOW long he stood so he did not know. It was the cries and splashing sounds from behind which made him swing his head and stare back. Huada, Rassini and Duplaix were coming towards him now, leaving the first pillar. A fourth man was behind them—Rond. Rond was driving them, his pair of automatics held high above the water.

Rond was not five feet behind Duplaix, the last man, when he reached the pillar. Rond's lips pulled back as he yelled at Maxin:

"You got the dynamite and wire? Give it to me, then! Then you start back. These other dogs and I will do the rest of the job. Go on—fast! You've done enough of your bit."

Maxin tripped, going back, and fell below the surface. He was so carried rapidly, bumping and sliding over the stones of the river bed, for perhaps a hundred yards. When he broke clear again and crawled on his hands and knees up into the shallows of a little sandspit, the raking machine gun fire had been lifted from him.

He swivelled around, shaking the water from his eyes. He could not see the men he had left behind the second pillar. Where they were now he did not know, and he had no way of telling. But the furious hand-to-hand fighting up above for possession of the bridge had stopped. The swarthy Indians of the Army of Freedom were hunching back from behind their breastworks, deserting that end of the bridge. And as he watched the bridge structure gave a vast, slow shudder, then another and far more violent one, followed by the slow, roaring explosion of the final sticks of dynamite. The first two con-

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crete pillars caved as if made of sand. The upper structure of the bridge itself trembled, twisted, fell thundering into the stream, sending up a cloud of spray from the smashed masonry, which for several minutes masked the river from bank to bank.

Maxin took his chance then, and ran for the bank, scrambled up it, pulling at boulders and the roots of bushes and small trees. Where the men of the army lay on the bank top, there was wild cheering and shouting now. Some of them sprang up, laughing, to help Maxin forward, talking to him in deep Indian gutturals that he did not understand.

Rond sat on the trodden grass beneath the branches of a great *ceiba* tree. He was stripped to the waist, and water still streamed from his boots and trousers. A bespectacled little man who wore a white jacket with a red cross pinned to the shoulder was bending over him, dressing the long, raw gash in his side. Looking up from watching that work, Rond saw Maxin, and called to him in a strong, calm voice:

"Come here. you. Sit down. *Señor,* the doctor, here, will have a look at you as soon as he's through with this . . ."

Maxin slumped down, his blue, stiff lips working nervously.

"The others?" he husked. "The others, Rond?"

Rond smiled slowly. "They're all right; they'll all live—and they'll all fight again. From now on, they'll be right up front in every attack, with two officers watching them, with orders to shoot them the minute they try to back out . . . I saw everything that happened down below; I saw them push you out, alone. So from now on you stick along with me; you'll serve me as my orderly, and go where I go. And we're going at once—within an hour. Three days from now, and we'll be knocking at the doors of the capital town up there, old-timer . . . You're wearing a uniform still, Maxin; maybe we can make a soldier out of you after all. How about it? What do you say?"

Maxin said nothing; he had dropped back upon the grass and into a deep faint.

"Fix him up," grunted Rond, pushing away the doctor's hands. "He's not such a bad fellow, and a little bit better than some . . ."

CHAPTER V.

THE SNIPER.

MAXIN was never to forget those next three days. During the World War he had served with a combat division on the Western Front, and had been in some action along the Somme and the Chemin-des-Dames. But none of it compared in ferocity and wild, continued intensity of motion and attack with the fighting which he saw and went through with Rond.

In those three days and nights he was not once more than five feet from Rond's side; and Rond was always in the fore of that fighting, organizing and leading the attacks, going forward with the first men of the van. At the beginning of the fighting which had started directly after the demolition of the bridge, three of Rond's brother officers and commanders in the revolutionary army had been killed off. It was Rond who took their places; Rond who supplanted them and became the moving spirit, the controlling mind and the sole commander of the ragged, desperate army. Rond's touch, his un-

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remitting courage and audacity, brought victory.

In two days, two towns fell before him; and on the evening of the third day his army faced the high-walled and dirty old capital city, and his batteries of field guns, captured just a few hours before, were ranging their first bursts over the city. His infantry was swinging up into position for the attack, and the cavalry squadrons were masking the walls against counter-attack or relief.

Near dawn of the third night, Maxin saw his former companions, the men who had escaped with him from Guiana. They were in a company of what had been Rond's old regiment, one that had been incessantly in action since the departure from the railway bridge-head. The three men were torn, speechless, caked with dust and powder smoke. They stared at him with eyes which barely recognized him. But before they could speak to him, Rond had swung on, jerking his head back to call at Maxin in a curt command which he instantly obeyed . . .

They smashed and drove their way into the city that dawn. Rond went with the leading company; Maxin with Rond. Inside the battered gates and walls the last of the troops of the old dictator, seasoned and hard-bitten professional soldiers who had given no mercy and expected none, waited for them. The defenders were willing to fight every last step on the way through the city.

Machine guns, hand grenades, rifles and crude dynamite bombs racketed in the narrow, dark and winding streets. Men met and killed each other hand-to-hand, fighting with clubbed rifles or the *machetes* of the native Indian troops of Rond's command. Rond was in all of it, and Maxin staggered numbly, stupidly after him, afraid, now, to go more than a few feet from Rond's side.

SO they battled through one barricaded and machine gunned street, broke forth into another and deserted one. Rond and he were alone now; Rond had ordered the men who had taken the barricade with them to stay and clear the way for the cavalry and the infantry following. Here they stumbled through darkness, and over the débris of wrecked houses, caved in by the artillery barrage which had preceded the infantry assault on the walls.

Maxin's foot caught once, over a shattered roof timber, and he went heavily down, making a frightened moaning sound as he fell. Rond cursed in a whisper, turning back to help him up. Then both of them heard the husky cry of warning from above them, and rifle and machine gun lead swept the street.

"Come! This way!" Rond was dragging him up, pulling him along. "In here—off the street!"

The grilled iron door of the gate sagged open into the dark *patio*. They raced inside, their boot heels pounding over the smooth tiles of the place. Out of that gloom, from the roof above, flame and lead spat at them from a light machine gun. They did not stop, nor even hesitate; they lunged on against the door of the house itself, thrust it open, entered.

The house was in utter darkness. For a moment or so there was no noise within. Then, coming from overhead, their straining nerves registered the faint sounds of softly moving feet, across the floor directly overhead. There was a small clicking sound. Rond was sliding a fresh clip into his automatic pistol.

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"Get down," he whispered. "Flat. They've got snipers in here, ready to enfilade the street when the boys came through. That's why this door was open, and the other one . . ."

He was silent, rigid. Maxin held his breath. Those booted feet were almost down the winding stairway, now. A hiss of expelled breathing came from Rond as he pulled back on the automatic trigger. He fired four shots; through the reverberations of them came the death screams of the man they had hit. But another man was thundering blindly through the darkness, making wildly for the door. One of his feet all but kicked Maxin in the face, and he tripped, went crashing down. Rond shot him point-blank before he got back to his knees.

"So!" whispered Rond. He was reloading the cartridge clip. "That's two. I don't think there are any more. Wait, and we'll see . . ."

"No," he spoke again, after perhaps ten minutes of strained waiting. "That seems to be all. There were only these two here. Come on now, we'll try the door, and get out into the street. I've got to get up to the main plaza and the palace; there's nobody really left except me to lead the lads any more, and they'll need me, there . . . But, take it easy. That mug on the roof across the *patio* knows we're here, and he has his piece trained right down on us . . ."

Whispering, he stooped down and dragged a rifle from the hands of one of the dead snipers. With its muzzle he pushed the door slowly open. But the rusty, uncared-for hinges creaked loudly as it swung. Lead lashed the *patio* tiles, tore at the door and the wall.

Rond sprang back, grunting. "He's there, all right. But he might have picked a little better spot than that.—Look! It's getting light behind him, to the east. The sun is coming up. The next time he takes a shot at us he'll have to show something of himself over the roof parapet. Which fixes it for us. You understand?"

"No." It was but a fluttered croak of sound.

ROND briefly cursed. "I don't think you'll ever learn, mug!" he whispered. "But, listen, while I tell you again. One of us will have to start out, for the gate, across the *patio*. He'll see that man, of course, and he'll start to swing his piece into action against him . . . There's no other way out of this joint, or those two snipers I killed wouldn't have taken the chance to come down the stairs here.

"Bu that's not my point now. Here it is. When one of us jumps across the *patio* for the gate into the street, that gunner will have to show himself as he starts to shoot. Then the one of us who remains here must take a quick, snap shot at him. If the one who stays is good enough, and quick enough, he'll drill that gunner before he gets the other man. But, naturally, the first lad out takes much the bigger chance.—How about it? You want to go—or stay and do the target practice? If we both go together, at the same time, he'll knock us both off. That, at least, isn't had to understand. What do you say, Maxin?"

There was a dim light from the oncoming dawn in the room now. By it, Rond could see Maxin's face. It was a colorless mask of terror; sweat streamed down it and the eyes looked like agates against their darkly lined sockets.

"Speak up!" insisted Rond in his horse whisper. "I'm giving you an even chance with me—to stay or go.

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You want to handle the gun, in safety here, and take your own chance of getting out alone, later, without being found and trapped like a rat by some of them the gunner will eventually call? Or will you make a run for it?"

"I—I—" It was agony for Maxin to speak. "I'm no good with a rifle, Rond; I might miss . . . You—you stay!"

"And you'll make the run for it?"

Maxin could only nod. A fierce smile came about Rond's mouth. He reached out and brought to him one of the dead sniper's weapons, a beautiful, modern high-power European rifle, with specially equipped telescopic sights. He lifted and brought back the breech-bolt, took out and minutely examined the brass-jacketed shells within, returned them, locked the bolt.

"All right." He said it very calmly. "Get up, and run.—Good luck, Maxin!"

Maxin staggered up. He moved like a man who was drunk, or drugged. But, as he teetered toward the door, the full gravity of his danger seemed to strike at his brain and nerves, for he lowered his head, uttered a weird cry, and then ran wildly, his heavy, hob-nailed boots striking little sparks of fire from the smooth tiles. Behind him, almost squarely in the doorway, Rond crouched, down on his right knee, the rifle already cupped hard in against his shoulder muscles, the sling-strap tight up over his elbow.

On the roof across the *patio,* the machine gunner saw and heard Maxin. Muttering eagerly, he swung his weapon by the traverse handles, deflected the muzzle in a sweeping arc, and tightened his index finger to come back on the firing trigger. It was just as his finger tightened that Rond's first bullet pierced his brain, and he slumped back, fell across his silent piece, then rolled, tipped across the parapet, to tumble down, asprawl and still, onto the tiles below.

"See?" muttered Rond, pushing Maxin before him through the gate. "It's all a gamble. A man gambles all the time; and sometimes he wins, sometimes he loses . . . Run, now! Follow me! Do you hear that? The lads are already up at the palace, shelling and attacking the place!"

CHAPTER VI.

PAY-OFF.

MOST of it was over when they got there. The sand-bagged palace steps were littered with the bodies of the men who had defended them; the doors were crashed in, and from the riddled windows came the wild yells and shouts of Rond's men as they started their job of looting. Rond halted them in that; he drove them from it with blows of his fists and the flat of his sword. He sent them before him down the great, gilded staircases and out into the street.

"Be still!" he called at them in a voice which cut like a sword. "Fall in! Attention!"

They obeyed; stood almost silent, only muttering a little, and laughing with the hysteria of victory and the knowledge that for them death was past now. Rond was still standing on the palace steps, talking to them, Maxin rigidly straight behind him, when the little patrol of lancers and yowling infantrymen came straggling into the plaza from one of the side streets.

The thin-bearded lieutenant of lancers who commanded that patrol rode with his sword in one hand and

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his pistol in the other. He raised his sword in salute, seeing Rond, and yelled out in a high voice. Rond saluted back, hearing him, then cried an order, and turned for an instant to Maxin, gaping at his shoulder.

"Do you recognize anybody in that gang of stragglers about the cavalry patrol?—Well, your friends—all three of them—are there. For the lieutenant and his patrol just came across the 'Old One,' the man who, up until about half an hour ago, ran this country. It looks like the Old One didn't think much of our chances of putting this revolution over, for he didn't try to pull out of here until about an hour ago. Then he tried it in his car. The lieutenant's patrol cut him off; so he killed himself and blew his brains out. But down in the bottom of the car the lieutenant found over a million in gold—all the cash left to the old government, and he's got it over there now.—Your friends seem to smell things like that. Look at them, now. Their tongues are hanging out. Well, they won't hang out for long. Not around here!—You're dismissed, for now. Go see them—if you want to!"

THEY formed a ragged semi-circle before him, in the deep obscurity below the curving sweep of the main palace staircase. Huada stood on one side, Duplaix on the other, Rassini in the middle. All of them had been drinking, and they reeked of raw rum. Rassini held a bottle in one hand as he talked.

"Nice we met you right here, Calf Brains. We got a couple of things we want to tell you . . . Have you been up to be paid off by him—by Rond—yet?"

"No." Maxin tried to draw back further against the wall. "I haven't been up there since I brought him his supper, about an hour ago."

"Huh!" Rassini took a long swig from the bottle, passing it on to the other men. "You know where his quarters are, then? Just what room he is in? . . . Well, that's good! That's fine! He just had us up—sent a sergeant to find us, and paid us off. And when he paid us he said that he was through with us, and with you; that he didn't want to see any of us again. Said he'd have us shot unless we were over the border in twenty-four hours . . ."

One of Rassini's hands dropped, to tap a pocket of his tattered uniform jacket; the motion brought forth a musical, chinking sound.

"I've got your pay right here, with mine. He paid us off in gold—some of the gold that the other old guy was trying to run out of the country with . . . Yeah, and that's all we get for the chances we took, and the promises he made to us . . ."

Abruptly and startlingly, Maxin laughed. "For the chances *you* took? You mean, perhaps, the job down in the river?—Or afterward, when he kept a pair of officers behind you, all the time you were in action?"

"Shut up—or I'll bust you one in the jaw! Of course, for that . . . You got us into this whole mess. No wonder we pushed you out first, there in the river. It's all your fault—from the beginning. But forget that now, and think back on what he's done to you, yourself. How about the hot spots he's dragged you through in the last few days? What's that story these guys outside are telling about you and him in that wrecked house? How he chased you out, to take the machine gun fire, while he stayed safe behind you? How about that?"

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Maxin moistened his lips clumsily with the tip of his tongue.

"That's different; he gave me my choice, there."

"So? And is it much different to kick you, and us, out of the country like this? You're stupid, Calf Brains; but you're not too stupid to get this. Rond has made a sucker, a fool, out of you, all along. He ducked out on you, eight years ago, when he could have taken you along. In those eight years he made something out of himself; and you would have, too, if you'd had his chance, and those free years. Then, when we come along, he gives us a gun, some wild talk about big money—and plenty of chances to get killed. We all slacked, naturally. Even you, in the beginning, before we got across that bridge. But after that he put you through it constantly; made you take every chance he took. All right for him. Sure. He had a whole lot to win—and he's won it. He'll be president of this country now, probably, and deep in the real gravy . . . And where do you go? Over the border within twenty-four hours, before you're slugged! What do you think about that? And about your friend, Rond?"

Maxin made no answer. Uneasily, he was trying to slide away; to break past the barrier of their bodies.

CHAPTER VII.

ANOTHER CHANCE.

HUADA pinned him back against the wall with a shove of his big hand. "Listen, you!—To me, for a change.—You're with us now. We brought you through; we handled your paddle when you were sick on the sea, and carried you in the jungle when you had the fever. We were real partners with you. The only time we stood you up was when Rond, the man you led us to, forced us down to that dynamite job. But don't get too stupid with us here—or you won't even live to see the border! We're tough lads, and by now you know that, Calf Brains. So, keep quiet and listen to us. Do you know what's up there in that room Rond is using as his headquarters office?"

"The gold? The stuff they found in the car?"

"Just that. Over a million, in notes and gold coin . . . And Rond's alone with it up there now. We know that; we've been standing here by the stairs ever since we got through our pay-off with him, and we know. All his other officrs are out finishing up, straightening out the town and collecting prisoners and loot . . . Now, are you still too stupid to see what we're after?"

"You mean—?" Maxin could not finish it; he just stood staring wildly at them.

"Yes, you mug! The gold! There's only a couple of those dumb Indian sentries up there in the hall before his room. You can get past them, and we can't. You're known as his personal orderly. We've been kicked out for good. So you're the only one of us who can get up there, fix him, and fix it so we can all get the gold. We'll be waiting for you, outside in the hall; and when you come out we'll take care of those sentries.

"Then we make a break for it, and the border. There are plenty of fast cars, out in the courtyard, in back, and we can pick off one of them . . . So, now—"

"Be quiet, Houda!" Duplaix had spoken. There was a gun, a big German automatic, in his hand. He had just taken it from his pocket. "We

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want that gold. You can get it for us. If you don't or if you don't want to—you get this. For, right here is where our partnership ends. Without that gold, we'd be flat, and stuck, in two weeks; probably be sent back to the jug again. With it, we can go places and be real swell guys, for a long time. You split with us, take your crack, and go your own way, if you want to, and if you don't want more of our swell company.—Or you stick with us.—But in any case you get that stuff—or a slug out of this! Which is it? Quick! You afraid of Rond? You afraid to pay him back, after all he's done to you in the last eight years?"

Maxin's lips parted narrowly. His eyes were gleaming. "Give me the bottle," he husked. "Give me a swig first!"

Huada softly laughed, holding it out to him. "Here, take this gat, too. But, don't shoot him until you're sure of the gold, or until you've told him just how much you love him!"

"No." Maxin was coughing from the shock of the run. He had slid the pistol down into the baggy side pocket of his tunic. "Don't worry about that. It's been coming to him for a good long time . . ."

They stepped back, silently, as he strode past them, his body bent into a kind of nervous crouch, as if he already faced Rond. So he went, swiftly, up the stairs. Walking one by one, and with studied casualness, they pursued him at a distance, but close enough to see him pass unchallenged past the two sentries in the hall, and then disappear through the door into the room which held Rond. The door closed upon him, cutting him from their sight. They smiled, glancing quickly at each other, then moved swiftly from the sentries' right and into a dark little side hallway giving off the main one which they had just followed.

IT was a big room, richly furnished and now rather dimly lighted. Stepping into it, his body butting the door shut behind him, his right hand bringing the big automtaic out and up, Maxin did not see Rond clearly for a moment. Then his staring eyes focussed and registered every detail in the room. Rond sat in a huge, heavy chair which had been a prided possession of the late president of the country. His tunic and cap were off; he sat in his sweat-drenched shirt sleeves, his booted legs wide, his hands down deep in the broad folds of his uniform breeches. Near the door, and close to where Maxin stood, were his cap, tunic and sword, thrown carelessly upon a small chair. And from the back of the same chair hung his sword belt and the holster which held his automatic. Maxin made certain of that even before he spoke.

"Sit still! Absolutely still, Rond! I'll shoot you if you move an inch!"

Rond had seemed to be in a doze, or light sleep. Now his head jerked up and his eyes widened perceptibly. Otherwise, he remained utterly motionless, his body in exactly the same posture as before. He kept silent, as if he was stunned, or amazed, thought Maxin. Maxin smiled at the thought as he strode slowly forward, the gun at his right hip. He stopped perhaps four or five paces away from the other man. He spoke in a harsh, almost openly triumphant voice.

"I'm making a last call, Rond. Nothing more than that. Of course—" His free hand gestured towards the sagging leather saddle-bags which lined the wall behind Rond. "Of course, I'm going to take those with me. But you

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won't really mind that; you'll be able to squeeze out a whole lot more where that came from—just like the guy before you did . . ."

Rond smiled then, his lips moving very slightly. The gun leaped higher in Maxin's hand. His voice cracked.

"Don't do that, Rond! Or I'll plug you, sitting there!"

"Plug me?" Rond's smile had broadened. "No, not that. Not you, Maxin . . . You're an awfully bad specimen of a tough guy; your pals haven't taught you well enough. Anyhow, you haven't got enough nerve to shoot me. You haven't even enough nerve to come here alone, like this. You wouldn't have come—unless your pals had forced you to, had frightened you into it!—Am I right? Why don't you contradict me?—Or slug me?"

"Shut up!" It was hoarsely said, almost a dream. "I'll show you, Rond! I'll—"

"You'll show me nothing—except the one blind spot of your whole nature, Maxin. I'm not afraid of you and your gun. You won't shoot me—you lack the will, though perhaps not the courage to do it. And I'll tell you why. It's because you've got no initiative, no will, of your own. You've never used your will. Always, you've clung to somebody else; you've let somebody else do your thinking for you.—Right?"

He stopped, his eyes cold, level, unmoving, holding upon Maxin's unblinking eyes. Then he uttered a soft sound of laughter.

"Look at you now! Those other men forced you to come here; they forced their will upon yours, so that you came in here—this far. But now you're unable to go any farther; now that you've met me. Because when you were a kid your mother, or some older brother, always did your thinking for you; they made up your mind for you the way they thought it should have been made up. Your bosses did it, too, when you went to work, and your officers did it for you in the army. When you went back to your job, after the war, your bosses framed you; they used you as their tool . . ."

HE paused, letting a silence fall in upon his words, studying Maxin, tacitly demanding that the other speak or move.

"Can't even move, or act, now, can you?" he went on. "Any more than you could when they brought you to court for what other men had done to you, through your lack of will. No more than you could when they sentenced you to Guiana. No more than you did when I struggled away from you on the beach, unable to carry you, and you allowed yourself to be captured and sent back . . . It's a long story, for you—and all the same. You're not a coward—not in the real sense of the word. You're just afraid of yourself—afraid to trust yourself. With me, you're afraid to leave me; you've gone through enough action for a dozen men in these last few days—just because you were in absolute fear of being left alone. In that shelled house we got trapped in here in the town, for instance, you chanced being shot rather than be left alone, on your own resources and in comparative safety!"

For the briefest part of a second, Rond's glance left Maxin's face, went to the saddle-bags against the wall. "There's the gold you're after. Go and get it, why don't you? Try!—Or turn, and face those three rats who are waiting for you out there, and who have probably promised to kill you if you

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dare to come out without the gold. Go on!"

Maxin moved one foot, then the other, and stood still. There was sweat on his face now. His lips were a pale, thin line across the deep, drained grayish color of his face. But the gun remained steady in his hand, and his voice was fairly clear when he spoke.

"You dare me to do that, Rond? To shoot you—and take that gold?"

"Dare you?" Rond faintly smiled as he repeated the question. "Yes, I dare you. Just as I dare you to go out and face those three mugs. They're rats, yellow-bellied rats. They'd part you from your share of the gold no sooner than you brought it to them; but it's no job of mine to tell you that—now. They'd wreck you, Maxin, as they've all but wrecked you now. If you had the courage, the self will, to turn around and open that door, to go out and face them, you'd face a new, clean future here with me. In this new country. But you—"

His voice fell into a silence.

No sound came from Maxin. There was only the slur of his booted feet upon the thick plush of the carpet as he slowly swung—back towards the door. He did not get through the door; behind him, Rond laughed, just as his sweaty palm found the knob, turned it and brought the door open. Rond's laughter warned him; it was only a kind of dim, sickening shock which went through him when he recognized the three men standing within the ring of the sentries' bayonet ponts, down the hall. Then he wheeled again, back into the room, and softly shut the door.

Rond was standing up now. From the side pocket of his widely flaring riding breeches he had just brought out a small automatic pistol, no bigger than his clenched fist. Then, silently, he pushed aside the heavy chair which he had occupied, and with a quick glance indicated the electric button concealed beneath it. Only after he had done that did he speak.

"IT'S been a long time for me, getting here. I've had my share of chances. This one, just now, I figured as the last . . . I had this in my pocket all the time; I had it trained on you from the instant I heard the door knob turning outside. I pushed the bell right after you came in. I figured they'd force you to this; they'd been here, and they'd seen the gold . . . Now, they'll never worry about gold again.—You understand?"

Maxin tried to nod, looking at the gun in his own hand, then once more at Rond. Rond sat again in his chair, his legs and feet spread out, much as he had sat before.

"You've won, Maxin," he said. "You won as soon as you turned your back to me and took one pace toward that door. If you hadn't, I probably would have had to kill you, or you would have gone along with those three and become as bad as they, or worse. You might have met what they're going to meet now . . ."

He stopped, to draw from a rear pocket his cigarette case and lighter, and to hold them forth in turn to Maxin. He performed these motions silently. Outside, in the courtyard, a cavalry bugle was sounding, blowing the call for "Boots and Saddles." In silence, and motionlessly, they listened through the final tumbling of the notes.

Rond's head came gradually up. "You remember, a couple of weeks ago, when you met with me again for the first time, and a bugle blew? Remember what I asked you and those

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others then? All of us—the five of us—had once served France as soldiers. That chance has forever been taken from us. But as I told all of you, the chance was here for us, in this place—the chance to soldier, and to begin all over again. Now, just you and I are left. Those three are—gone . . . That bugle just now was sounding for a patrol to go out on reconnaissance duty outside the town; there's still plenty of scrapping left, for a soldier. How about it, Maxin? Would you like to take out that patrol—command it, for tonight?"

Maxin tried to speak. His lips and the cords of his throat worked, but the power of speech was now beyond him. But as Rond slowly straightened from his chair he too straightened. Maxin's heels met, then his hand came up, stiff and wide in salute.

THE END.

Cactus Blaster

THANKS to a humble insect, Australia is at last in a fair way to win its long battle against the prickly pear. This member of the cactus family first became established in Australia in 1840. Climate and soil conditions proved so favorable that it began spreading with tremendous rapidity. By 1870 it was quite out of control. Early in the present century the pest covered about 20,000,000 acres.

Prickly pear has long, needle-sharp spines equipped with barbs; it grows to considerable height, forming a dense thicket impenetrable to man or domestic animals. The agricultural and grazing industries of the island continent were threatened. Obviously something had to be done. Attempts to wipe out the pest by different mechanical means were utter failures; chemical warfare proved a trifle more successful, but its cost was prohibitive. There remained the possibility of enlisting as ally some enemy of the prickly pear. Great care must be used, lest the cure prove worse than the disease. When man deliberately interferes with nature's biological control, he treads on dangerous ground.

After exhaustive experimenting with various insects and parasites, a "restricted vegetarian" known as *Cactoblastis cactorum* was selected, and on him Australia pinned her hope. In 1925, 2,500 eggs were introduced. To-day the descendants of those eggs number billions. Mr. Cactoblastis is doing his work well, so partial to a diet of prickly pear that he will eat nothing else. Wherever he goes—and he travels fast—there is left behind a trail of dead and dying plants. Living up to his name he is literally blasting the cactus out of Australia. It is the caterpillars—about an inch in length—that do the damage. They are borers, tunneling through the pear from joint to joint, and devouring everything but the hard, spine-coated shell. One female moth lays about seventy-five eggs, which develop in six weeks or less. Two hatches of eggs occur each year. Since Cactoblastis will have no other food than the detested prickly pear, it is certain that when the war is finally over and the pear eradicated, he will accommodatingly die out.

George Metcalf Johnson.

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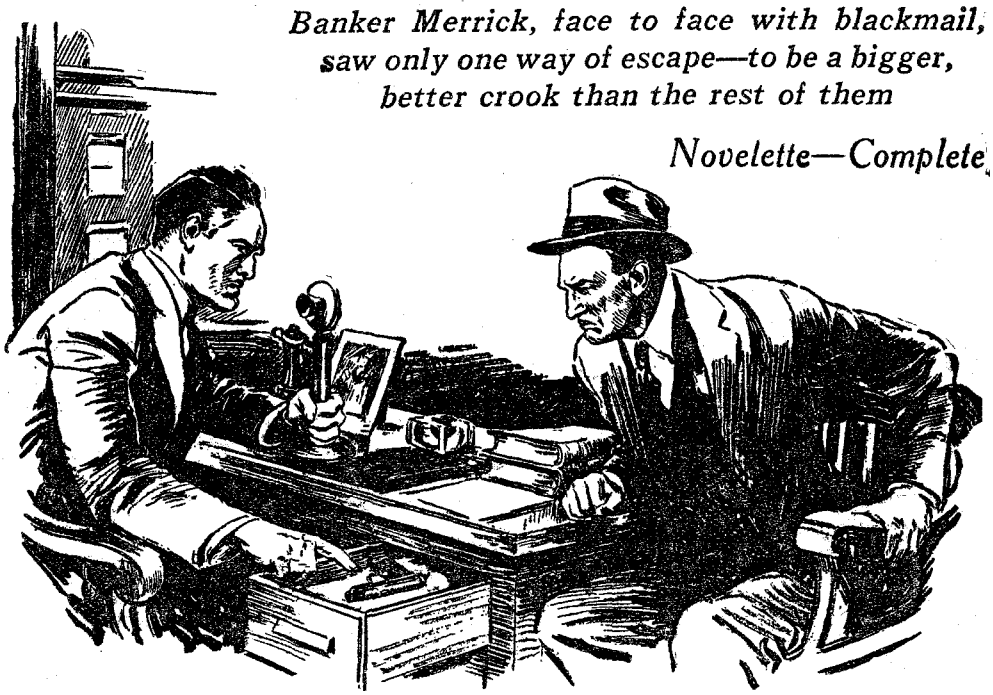
Parole

By WILLIAM CORCORAN

Author of "The Million Dollar Malacca," "Death in a Taxi," etc.

Banker Merrick, face to face with blackmail, saw only one way of escape—to be a bigger, better crook than the rest of them

Novelette—Complete



"See the gun? Shall I call the chief of police?"

CHAPTER I.

"THERE IS NO ESCAPE."

"ESCAPE, like most beguiling things, is pure illusion," Daniel G. Merrick believed sardonically; and if questioned would have declared sardonically, "There is no escape. There is, at best, but a choice of bondage."

This cynical testament was neither profound nor daringly original, yet Merrick might be forgiven. He uttered it to impress no one but himself. Which he did—sardonically—at least once daily, usually at a certain moment shortly after his arrival at the Bank of Innisfail, where he was head man—president—an amiable and wise despot.

Innisfail, it may be noted here, is a small city which, for all the quaintness of the name bestowed upon it by a sentimental Celtic founder, is as typically American as bank failures, Prohibition, or the current price in hogs. At once narrow and tolerant, clannish and charitable—one knows the town well, even though he may never have heard of it before.

Seated at his desk mornings, after greeting the staff with a cheerful rumble and disposing of the stub of the day's initial cigar, Merrick was wont to cast an accustomed, slightly amused glance upward through the plate glass

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front of the bank to a second story window across the street. There, above another desk, invariably he met the gaze of Jonas Galt—Estates, Realty, Insurance—a gaze chronically suspicious and full of sour warnings, as if it saw deep into Merrick's soul.

But that was merely old Jonas Galt's way with all the town—familiar and regarded indulgently by everyone who knew. To Merrick it was a symbol, as if Galt were principal keep in Merrick's chosen bondage. Merrick did not mind. A man wholly innocent and blameless and unafraid might have chafed under that sentinel-like scrutiny. Merrick did not mind. He merely smiled slightly, inscrutably, and turned comfortably to the morning mail, a very picture of executive competence and solidity, as seen from the street; square, firm shoulders; affable, intelligent head and face; features a little solid with approaching middle years, yet brown and vigorous and alert with ageless health and force.

This morning, Merrick found an early visitor commanding his attention. The man was a stranger, a smallish, wiry man with a pugnacious mouth. Pale, cool eyes stared from a narrow, arrogant face. He looked obscure—yet self-important and confident.

"The name is Merrick? Daniel G. Merrick?" said the stranger.

"It is."

Inexplicably, this amused the man; he sat down unbidden. "I want to have a talk with you. I suppose this place is all right?"

Dryly, Merrick smiled. "I've found it satisfactory for most of the business I do."

"This is not business," said the man, his eyes steady and a little sinister. "And I doubt you're going to find it very satisfactory."

The assumption was correct. A quiver of electric tension ran through Merrick's imperturbable frame as the man identified himself. The name was James Wool. The occupation, private detective. The errand, a certain delicate matter of the unmistakable resemblance between Daniel G. Merrick, capable president of the Bank of Innisfail, and one Sam Bodine, six years vanished from a certain Eastern city, following the perpetration, discovery, and indictment for and of the crime of conspiracy to defraud!

JAMES WOOL came bluntly, grimly, to his point. "Merrick, I know you are Sam Bodine. Naturally, I established that before coming here. I wasn't actually looking for you. I sort of stumbled across you by accident. But somebody was bound to. It's remarkable you've lasted so long. You've covered up pretty well. The last place to look for a crook should be in the president's chair of a bank. I had to look twice, myself!"

"Praise from Cæsar!" murmured Merrick. His composure was perfect, though his veins ran cold as ice. "Go right on."

"You seem to have made yourself pretty solid with this town," Wool said admiringly, even a little enviously. He began to relax. His pale eyes were narrowed a little, and covetous. "I delayed a couple of days, as a matter of fact, trying to figure it out, but it stopped me. How do you do it?"

"Do what, pray?" There was a breath of mockery in the tone.

"What's the racket? Where are you cashing in? I don't see it. Pillar of respectability and all, and not a citizen wise to the angle?"

"Why should I tell you?"

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"Why not?" mocked Wool. "You're washed up. The nippers are on. You might as well."

Merrick considered this. "Well, I might, but I doubt you'd understand. You've named the racket. It was a good one, and I'll miss it."

"*I* named it?" challenged Wool. "Named what?"

"'Pillar of respectability,'" quoted Merrick. "That's all there ever was to it. It's still the best racket in the world. You're surprised? Doesn't it occur to you that my take, as president of the city's foremost bank, over a course of years, is several times that of any single haul I might make here?"

The other made a soft, scornful sound. "You? A crook?"

Merrick shrugged slightly. "I want all I can get in this world. I've found a way to get all that I want. It's as simple as that.—But I doubted you'd understand."

Wool grew suspicious, hostile. He snarled softly:

"Off the cloud, pal—down to earth! You're not going to soft-soap out of this rap. We're well on the road to Brandon Prison! Hand in hand. We might as well understand one another before we start."

"Certainly!" Merrick's calm, decisive voice turned a shade harder. "And any understanding includes your unquestioning acceptance of the fact that not a single criminal act is hidden anywhere in my record in Innisfail!"

Wool looked more than incredulous; he looked puzzled. Then he looked a little annoyed. "What of it? Why try to impress me? An investigation will soon establish that one way or the other."

"There will be no investigation."

"Oh, no?" came the sinister drawl. "Why not?"

Merrick, for answer, reached over the desk and turned a framed portrait photograph about so that it faced his visitor. It pictured a pleasant, handsome woman and two beautiful small children. "That," said Merrick, "is all the reason necessary."

Wool viewed the woman and children unmoved. "Tough on them!" he remarked. "But that was your lookout. What's it got to do with me?"

MERRICK was sure of himself; he was a man of quick hard decision, and he did not whine, ever.

He had gambled high, and lost. He was already deep into the next play, without quibble over the last.

"You're not taking me back East for nothing, Wool. There's a State fugitive-from-justice reward, I suppose. That was one of the things you'd look into. The surety people never give up; they still offer a sizable reward doubtless. There's a nice slice of money—"

"Hold on!" Wool said suddenly. "I've heard all this before, you know. It's been set to music. 'There's a nice slice of money, but you'll pay me twice as much to drop the matter.' The answer is no! I've seen that offer accepted—and somebody get railroaded or framed or bumped off."

"Don't interrupt me again," Merrick said quietly. "I'm making no offer. I'd be bled the remainder of my life. What I was about to say is this: if you insist on publishing the details of this story, so that it becomes known locally, I shall surrender to the chief of police, a man who is my friend, and we'll cut you out of the reward entirely."

"The hell you say!" Wool blustered.

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Merrick jerked open a desk drawer and reached a calm hand inside. With the other hand he drew a telephone toward him. "See the gun?" he said, nodding to the drawer. "Better sit quiet.—And observe the telephone. Shall I call the chief?"

Wool sat very quiet. A myriad emotions flickered through his wan pupils. His gaze went calculatingly about the bank and out in the street; returned to Merrick. He licked his lips slightly. "I guess we can arrange things," he murmured.

"We can. I'm accepting the inevitable. I'll go with you. But quietly. I intend merely to disappear from the town, and when Sam Bodine arrives East, Dan Merrick will have ceased forever to exist. Personally, I don't matter, but my family does—and the bank. I'd commit more than fraud to shield them. A blank mystery, without any visible scandal, will be far easier on them than an exposure of my past. When will you be ready to leave town?"

"I'll give you till to-morrow noon." Triumph suffused the sinister little man—a curious, half-suppressed kind of triumph. "And you won't try to get away meantime. It would be exceedingly dangerous!"

"I shan't." Merrick rose. On his forehead a vein stood out throbbingly. "We understand one another, I imagine. But you'd better stay out of my sight until to-morrow. There may be danger in that, too."

"Yeah?" drawled Wool. He laughed, rising leisurely.

"And now," said Merrick, "get out!"

"Going!" acknowledged Wool, ironically and with a certain admiration for this man who was already virtually his prisoner. "But I'll be back—soon!" There was swagger in his jaunty, self-satisfied departure.

THE teller in the nearest cage was watching, alert and curious, but quite uncomprehending, as Daniel Merrick sat down. Merrick closed the desk drawer, righted the framed photograph, replaced the telephone. He took out a cigar and carefully clipped the tip with a pair of desk shears. The match flame as he lighted the cigar was steady; a hard, hot blue, like the flame in his eyes.

"There is no escape," Merrick had told himself often. "Escape is pure illusion." He had schooled himself in that philosophy, yet the reckoning was hard. Six years of watchful, anxious labor; six years' rebuilding of a life—and a bird of passage drifting in the door one evil morning to demolish all the building in a breath!

Merrick was proud of those six years. He had served Innisfail well, he knew, guiding it firmly through tumult and disaster of the sort to test the mettle of a man; weighing his own strength, his judgment, and his worth. Actually, it was the urgency of those years that had pushed him up so rapidly from wary obscurity; it was the crisis and the hour, seeking out the man big enough to cope with them. He had no regrets, nor had Innisfail.

He had done his best, hopefully and excellently; other hands must learn to take his place. The pleasant woman in the photograph, and those matchless babies—they would miss him more than he dared think. No hands could replace his hands there.

It was good to know that they would not be entirely helpless. He would be leaving them some money, and the prestige of an untarnished name. Actually the name did not belong to

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him; it belonged to them all—to the three in the photo, to the bank, to the town depending on the bank. To injure it would be to strike at them all, in varying but terrible degrees. He could not let them down; he would bequeath them that much—a bulwark and a strength.

Then after that—other years, another name. He refrained from thinking of them too vividly. He would face them soon enough. They loomed inexorable and immense, and he was bowed before the prospect.—There was no escape; there was but a choice of bondage. And Dan Merrick was making his choice.

CHAPTER II.

STOLEN BONDS.

THE morning work resumed, but automatically. Merrick moved in an accustomed aura of heartiness and well-being, but that was automatic, too. Much of life had long been automatic, for these tasks were no undue strain on his ample powers; and the trick of concealing well his personal emotions was one long mastered. The years had prepared him for this moment.

At noon, Merrick telephoned home that he would not drive out for lunch that day. He put on hat and coat and walked down Market Street. He turned on Court Street for one block, and entered the Innisfail police station, back of City Hall.

The desk sergeant looked up, saluted affably, and said, "He's in. I doubt he's busy right now. Go ahead up and see."

Merrick waved a general greeting around the station house, went up to the second floor like one very much at home, and entered the door marked "Chief of Police."

A bank president and a police chief have much in common, for all the disparity between their backgrounds and duties.

Between them, often enough, they can make or break a town. These two understood one another, appreciated one another, gave deference each to the other in his special field.

"Gabe," said Merrick as they both sat back and lighted cigars, "I've got a question to put to you. Not a very big one—call it irrelevant curiosity. But you can shed some light on it."

"It had better be a real small one, Dan'l," said Gabe Miller sardonically. "I'm a poor hand at big ones. Don't take my word for it! Read what the rip-snorting editor of our *Argus* has to say about me on his front page this morning."

Merrick smiled. "Not another crime wave, Gabe?"

"So help me, if so much as a hen-coop is robbed to-night—I'll have a full-fledged crime wave to contend with to-morrow—at least in the columns of the *Argus*. Portugee Johnny Moline is in town. The *Argus* news man happened for once to be at the depot, instead of draped over a beer bottle at Nell Seaman's place, and he saw Moline arrive. Seemingly, his arrival is entirely my fault."

"Moline?" said Merrick. "Moline? I've heard the name."

Miller gave him a look. "A security shark. Newcomer to these parts. Police record, but always escapes conviction. Killed two men; dangerous." The chief's eyes kindled. "Met him yet? Tall, dark, good looking brute; thirty-five or so; smooth; clever; hard. Typical Latin; hot-tempered, vengeful, kill-you-for-two-cents, and with half a

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reason. You might keep an eye open. He's a slippery one."

Merrick's eyebrows arched skeptically, but he said, "I'll remember."

"Well, I don't think he's here to make trouble," Miller conceded. "He'd never arrive so openly if he was. So long as he behaves himself, I've no call to bother him, editors or no editors!" he finished with a snort.

Merrick chuckled.

It was a political feud, ironically comic because the issues primarily at stake were never in the least related to those raised, with such commotion, in the public eye.

"It's just a small question I want to ask you, Gabe," Merrick assured him, returning to his own affairs. "I merely want to learn something about police routine, in the identification of missing or unknown persons. To take a hypothetical case: suppose you found a stranger lying dead up an alley.—How would you proceed?"

"You mean violence? Murder?"

"Possibly." Merrick was indifferent. "Find him alive, perhaps. Or starve him to death, if that'll help. I'm interested merely in the technique of identification."

THERE was keen conjecture in Miller's gaze, but Merrick was offering no explanations. The chief leaned back in his chair. "Criminal detection in real life is rarely a business of deduction, or what is called synthesis, Dan'l. The big detective in the stories is never a professional cop, you'll have noticed. There's a good reason. That kind of detective shines brilliantly in some hand-picked, isolated case where his guess is good as another's; but he'd likely bog down in a week, on a routine police detail where the cases come in dozens. Police work is partly organization, partly slow elimination—and partly luck.

"Unknown persons are identified as methodically as you fellows sort checks."

"All right, let's limit the hypothesis." Thoughtfully, Merrick suggested, "Suppose you picked me up and I couldn't—or wouldn't—tell who I was. You knew I was a fugitive, say, and you wanted to find out where I came from. What would you do?"

"Search you thoroughly, of course. That failing, inspect the clothes. The laundry marks, for instance. Every laundry in town registers its mark; unknowns we can broadcast to other cities—tailors' labels; cleaners' marks—ever have that suit cleaned? You'll find date and data marked on the lining, where you'd never suspect. Blood stains, for instance, get special notation.

"Then, if nothing comes of all that, physical detail. Photographs to be published.

Inspection of the hands, indicating habits or trade. An autopsy, in murder cases, often develops dietetic clues and occupational peculiarities; metallic oxides in the organs and such. The dental work is another angle. As a last resort, we can even get experts who will reconstruct the features for photographing, even when they have been largely destroyed."

"Are photographs always published in these cases?"

"Most of them are. Sometimes, men who don't want to be identified do a home-made job on their own faces."

"How?"

"Acid burns, for one way. Carbolic solution. It's easily available; everybody has a bottle in his medicine cabinet. They're slow to heal, and they

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tide a man over the first crucial period when the alarm is fresh."

"Then it's pretty difficult for a person to disappear successfully?"

"Depends, Dan'l. Depends on conditions." Miller smiled a slight, fleeting smile, as if he'd just thought of something enlightening. "Last spring the New York police found a dead man in a gully on the outskirts of the city. Maybe you recall?

"What they found was pretty much a plain skeleton, carefully stripped of all identifying marks. They got to work on it. Inside of three days, they had the dead man identified as a Wall Street messenger, missing for months. He'd been kidnaped, robbed, and murdered."

Merrick pondered. "I remember the case. But did that help to catch the criminals?"

"It did not. It merely means that they'll be sure to burn in the chair if they ever are caught. They've got the necessary *corpus delicti.*" Miller sobered a little, watching the banker closely. "What is it, Dan'l? Anything on your mind you care to talk about?"

"Nothing!" Merrick smiled slowly, and got up. "Nothing in your department, Gabe." He looked out of the window a moment, thinking; then he asked, "what do you know about a man named James Wool—a private detective from out of town?"

"Not much," said Miller promptly. "He dropped by to introduce himself. They usually do. Said he was here on something unimportant—divorce work or some such."

"I see," said Merrick. He turned away from the window. "Well, I guess my irrelevant curiosity is sufficiently satisfied for to-day. If I need any more help, I'll let you know."

Miller rubbed his jaw. "You let me know. I'm a good hand at ways and means, Dan'l."

Merrick took his departure, and Gabe Miller watched him go. In the chief's eye was a light of mingled liking and shrewd surmise.

MERRICK walked back up Market Street to the Mercantile Garage, where he got his car and drove out to his home, on the edge of town. He lived in a pleasant three-story brick Dutch colonial house, surrounded by shrubs and a mellow lawn. His wife had gone somewhere with the children for the afternoon.

The domestic staff of two, foregathered over a cup of tea in the kitchen, observed thereafter that although Merrick moved about much on the floor above, he moved quietly, like a man subdued and oppressed. Both women had been in the house since it was built, and a concern of the master's was a concern of theirs. They were deeply troubled. It was not normal for him to be home during the day; it was unnatural for his hearty presence to be so stilled. Banks were mysterious and awesome places, but many banks these times had proved weak and fragile strongholds for all of that. They hoped, together, that the Bank of Innisfail might be only half so good as its master.

Up above, Merrick worked slowly but steadily. His tasks were small but many. They must constitute a machinery that would function well hereafter, without his guiding hand. There was a vast litter of papers to be sorted, arranged, destroyed in part.

He ransacked the desk, and from a small wall safe nearby brought many others.

Once he got up after a moment of abstracted reflection, and went to the

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bathroom medicine cabinet, where he took down a small bottle of household disinfectant of a carbolic acid base. He read the chemical formula on the label, and the directions for use, including the warning to use with care. He studied the thing at some length. Then he took down a roll of absorbent cotton and tore a piece from the wadded roll.

He dipped a tip of the cotton in the small bottle, and smeared the back of his hand with the dark brown fluid. It felt cool; that was all. But in a moment, as he waited, it began to sting with the bite of acid; a sting that grew increasingly. He wiped it off, and there was a sullen looking stain on the hand, from the color of the solution and the quick inflammation of the seared skin. A bit longer and the skin would be definitely burned, so that a film of scar tissue would inevitably form.

Looking into the mirror, Merrick ran one hand over his face. His skin was healthy and tough, but not tough enough to resist that solution. Inflammation and scar tissue would effectively destroy the familiar image reflected in the glass, and a considerable time would pass before the valiant myriads of defenders in the blood stream, rushing to the breach, could repair the damage and restore the image. It should be sufficient time.

Recognition would be extremely difficult, in person or by any published photograph.

Merrick restored the things to the cabinet and went back to work on his papers.

He was deeply immersed in this when the doorbell rang. He listened, unconsciously, and recognized, very consciously, the voice of the man named Wool. He sprang up immediately, to direct that the visitor be shown upstairs.

WOOL was wearing a strange expression; he eyed Merrick with the look of a crooked and unscrupulous Santa Claus, sinister yet benevolent.

"I thought you agreed to keep out of my way?" Merrick said.

"That was this morning," Wool replied blandly. "You weren't in a mood to listen to reason then. You should be, by now."

Merrick stared. Then he said, "Come in here. Sit down. And don't raise your voice, or I'll give you reason to regret it."

Wool sat down a little jauntily. "You know, for a guy facing an old rap, you're pretty chesty, Merrick."

"Perhaps you'll realize," Merrick said, "that I am a desperate man, with few favors to ask."

Wool looked at him judiciously. He shrugged. "Maybe not so desperate as all that."

He watched the banker. Merrick waited, steadily meeting the gaze.

Wool said insinuatingly, "You'd like to skin out of it, wouldn't you?"

"No," said Merrick bluntly.

Wool's eyebrows were skeptical. He drawled, "You certainly find a lot of fun springing surprises on me, Merrick! You've just spent hours searching for a way out. You can't find any, so you tell me 'no.' That's dumb! I know a way out. I'm here to tell you about it."

Merrick grunted. "Go ahead."

Wool drew from an inside pocket an impressive looking document. He opened it to show the "$1,000" engraved in an upper corner. It was a bond issued in that sum.

"Merrick, you run that bank of

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yours single-handed. Whether square or crooked, you've done a good job. From all I can find out, it's still got money in it, which *is* something nowadays. The money is all in your hands, with nobody to interfere."

"The State sends around examiners to interfere quite regularly, in case you hadn't heard."

"To interfere with the hired help, should they try anything!" snapped Wool. "Not even the bank examiners could trip up a man in your position, while the bank was solvent. The cages, the ledgers, the vaults are all there under your thumb. It's been done before. Not often, but often enough. It can be done again."

"What can be done, specifically?"

Wool moistened his lips, smiling a little. "You see this? One grand, at par; gold backed. It's stuff that's quoted almost at par to-day. I know where there are one hundred of these tickets—one hundred thousand dollars! Almost cash in hand. Interested?"

"Go ahead."

"Now, as it happens, the stuff's hot. I'm not able to walk into just any bank that comes along and do business. Your bank is another matter. I might have asked for the sky, but I'm reasonable."

"You'd have got the sky, I suspect —all of it at once, on your head!"

Wool smiled confidently. "You've had time to think it over, Merrick. I know your kind; you're slow to come to reason, but you get there. I know my proposition, too; I've been working on it for days. I picked your bank from all the banks in this part of the State, because it's solid enough to swing the deal. I looked into every angle of it, and when I turned up that old rap of yours unexpectedly, it was like a plum falling into my lap."

"I see!" breathed Merrick.

The irony of it was exquisite. The very steadfast service he had rendered the Bank of Innisfail was the precise factor that marked it conspicuously for victimization by this weasel of a man. Still worse, that was what rendered it so helpless before him. It was not chance; there was the inevitability of an evil destiny about it.

"MY proposition is this," said Wool. "If you take this stuff off my hands and give me $80,000 in cash, or the equivalent of the stuff in good negotiable paper that I can peddle safely elsewhere, you and I and the old rap are quits!"

Neither said anything for a moment. Merrick's face was a little gray.

Wool added softly, "Are you interested—Mister Sam Bodine?"

Curtly Merrick commanded, "Let me see the certificate."

Wool eyed him, calculatingly, then handed over the document. Merrick opened the crisp, engraved certificate on the desk.

He examined it carefully. It was unquestionably authentic, as sound as government notes. Merrick frowned in deliberation, then picked up a newspaper. He consulted the financial page. Next he picked up a scratch pad and pencil.

What he wrote, out of Wool's line of vision, was:

Stolen Bond—one of lot of one hundred of similar face value, available to or in possession of James Wool, allegedly private detective, in Innisfail this date. Prompt, suitable action will recover remainder in town, exact whereabouts unknown. Suspect coöperation of confederates. *D. G. M.*

Selecting a paper clip, Merrick attached the memorandum to the bond. He folded the document deliberately,

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got up, walked over to the wall and thrust it into the wall safe.

Wool sprang to his feet as the safe door clicked home. "Hold on, Merrick!—Give that back here!"

"Too late," Merrick said imperturbably.

"Damn you—open that door!" Wool raged.

Merrick smiled a small, unpleasant smile as he returned to the desk. "I told you I was a desperate man, Wool."

Wool's eyes looked a little wild. He struck the desk a blow. "What are you trying to do, Merrick?"

"Demonstrate that I mean business. We're going east."

"You're a liar!"

Merrick drawled, "To prove my sincerity, we'll go down to the depot this instant and make our reservations. We leave to-night, on the midnight train."

Wool stared. He was utterly nonplussed. He said huskily, "You're worse. You're a sucker for punishment!"

"Since that seems to upset you more than it does me," Merrick said with grim amusement, "I feel well compensated."

And that, though Wool cursed and threatened, was an end of it. They were going east together.

CHAPTER III.

THE DOUBLE-CROSSER.

MERRICK drove down town with Wool in his car. He left the car on a side street and walked with Wool to the railroad station. Incessantly, almost with a touch of frenzy, the little man plied him with argument and persuasion. It had no effect. Merrick led the way to the ticket window inside the depot and made the reservations for the flyer passing through at midnight. His tone was steady and agreeable as he chatted with the agent at the window.

Outside the door, Merrick spoke to Wool. "You've said everything possible," he told him grimly. "Now shut up! We're taking the midnight. If you're not here when the train arrives, I'll turn over that bond to the chief of police. If you make any move to prevent this from going through, my wife will turn it over later, with full information. If you do as I say, she will have my instructions to place it in a plain envelope and mail it anonymously, in five days, to the governors of the New York Stock Exchange."

"You've doublecrossed me!" said Wool. "I'll come back here afterward and spill every last detail of your record!"

"No, you won't, Wool. I may be in Brandon—but I'll still be able to talk! The Board of Governors of the Stock Exchange will have that bond for evidence, and any time they'll willingly listen to my story as to how and why it came in with an Innisfail postmark. When you and I head east, we're dropping every connection with this town. I'll be Sam Bodine, and you found me a thousand miles from here. That'll be the story, and you'll stick to it!"

Wool groaned and swore simultaneously. "You fool! You sap! Asking for it—for a lousy small-town bank that's insured for a hundred grand, over and over!"

"Rather hard to understand, isn't it?" Merrick said. "I've allowed for that. However, the greatest asset in a bank is neither gold nor bonds, but confidence. No insurance covers that.

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By it I stand or fall; it's a thing greater than I am. My presence threatens it with destruction, so I'm going.—But I'm leaving it intact. That's my bond and obligation with the bank, the town, my friends, and my life; and I'm paying the debt. So mark my words well! If that goes, it will be joined in the destruction by everything and everyone responsible!" Merrick took a deep breath and calmed his emotions. "I'll expect you then. At midnight. Be on hand!"

Abruptly, he left Detective James Wool standing there, a defeated, curiously frightened little man who had somehow wandered far beyond his depth.

EARLY that evening, Merrick paused long enough in his room at home to procure from the desk drawer a wicked looking .38 automatic. Sliding the gun into an outer pocket, he went down town.

He dropped into the Fort Standish Hotel, two blocks from the bank. Buying a cigar at the counter, paused to look around. Among the loungers seated in the soft leather chairs was a placid, empty-eyed man whose very inconspicuousness seemed akin to the stolid, immobile, commonplace furniture.

Merrick walked back toward the dining room. On the way, he stopped a bellboy.

"Tell Ted Ruff I'm in the dining room. I want to see him."

Merrick waved away the waiter at the table and chewed on the cigar. In a moment the placid empty-eyed man drifted into the room and sat down opposite. He still looked placid, but his eyes were no longer empty.

"Something, Merrick?"

"In a way, Ted. I'm following up a little matter. I'm not calling on your department.—You know a man named Portugee Johnny Moline?"

"I do," Detective Ruff admitted. "I'm keeping an eye on him, after a fashion. He's right here."

"This moment?"

"I saw him go up in the elevator a few minutes ago."

"Good! And do you know a detective agency operative now in town named James Wool?"

"Wool? Heard of him at the station. Little punk from out of town. I wouldn't know him."

"You can't tell me, then, if Wool and Moline are acquainted?"

"Sorry. It's an angle I haven't observed."

Merrick grunted, brought up short by Ruff's reply. Then, "What is Moline's room number?"

"Room five hundred."

"Thanks," said Merrick. "I'll go up."

Ruff eyed him keenly. "Want me to go along?"

"I'd rather not."

Ruff shrugged, perfectly agreeable. "Have it your way. I'll be here if needed."

UPSTAIRS, Merrick listened for an instant at the door of Room 500. There was no sound within. He knocked. Promptly the door was opened, but the occupant, as if expecting someone else, stopped still and stared.

"Mr. Moline?" said Merrick.

The man in the doorway was tall, well set, darkly handsome. He was sleek, a trifle rakish and glib of mouth, opaque of eye, well dressed. "That's right," he said, faintly hostile. "What can I do for you?"

Merrick's eyebrows arched as he re-

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turned the stare. "You can let me in, can't you?"

Moline was hesitant for a second, then he stepped aside. Merrick walked into the room. He did not remove his hat; his hands were deep in coat pockets. He crossed the room, glanced quickly into the empty bathroom, and then faced his host. His expression was altered, hard; and his voice was hard.

"Where's Wool? Has he been here?"

Moline seemed to be at a loss. "No, he hasn't. He's—" But he caught himself. He became silkily angry. "What do you mean? Who is Wool? What's he to you?"

Merrick's lip curled a little, skeptically. "You don't know me?"

"Naturally! You didn't know me."

Merrick shrugged and looked about the room with calm, arrogant interest. "I've heard enough about you. You've certainly heard something about me."

Moline was overflowing with suspicion. "Look here, friend. If this is a game, let me in on the rules and I'll play you to a standstill. I think you got into the wrong room."

"No, I didn't." Merrick studied the tall man, sizing him up with impersonal appraisal. "This is the right room, though it may be the wrong moment. Unexpectedly, I seem to have the advantage. But that's all right—I know somebody has the advantage on both of us!"

Moline's exasperation seemed suddenly to run out of him.

He shrugged, smiled slightly, and walked over to the dresser to pull out a drawer.

Merrick said, "Don't touch it! I've got my own gun in this pocket." He added, "You're much too jumpy."

Moline stiffened, his hand in the drawer. Then, slowly, he withdrew it, a handkerchief in his grasp. He was smiling slightly as he unfolded the handkerchief, brushed his nostrils lightly, and thrust it into his breast pocket.

"I give you my word I don't know you, and haven't the least idea what this is all about," he said. "If we're to get anywhere, you'll have to explain."

"Sit down," Merrick commanded.

Moline gracefully obeyed, choosing a chair near the bed.

Merrick continued to scrutinize him. The banker's thoughts, puzzled and searching and uncompromising, played on his face. Then he kicked up another chair.

"If it's up to me, we'll never get anywhere, Moline. I'm all out of explanations myself. I'd like very much to talk to the brains in this deal. Which is it—you or Wool?"

MOLINE moistened his lips and looked at his polished fingernails. "That's hard to answer, not knowing just what deal you have in mind."

"Then there are more than one?" Merrick returned mockingly. "I mean the bonds, the hot paper. Who does a man talk to?"

Moline thought hard, looking nonplussed. "Bonds? I'm not sure. What bonds?"

Merrick nodded to himself sardonically. He got up, kicked the chair back. "Well, that simplifies it anyway.—Sorry. My error!" He made with finality for the door.

He was in the corridor when Moline's voice halted him. "One minute, friend. Don't be so hasty. Let a guy think this out a little."

Merrick looked back, reëntered the

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room. "You have no need to think anything out. I'm referring to Consolidated bonds, 1940's. A hundred thousand worth. Is that plain?"

"Very!" murmured Moline. "Come in and shut the door. You've probably come to the right place. But for Pete's sake, what's it all about?"

"Is Jim Wool coming here tonight?" Merrick demanded.

"No, I don't expect him."

"Do you know what he's done?"

"I have a fair idea. He's had a free hand."

"A free hand?" said Merrick. "*He's sold you out!*"

The emphasis on that statement made it penetrate deeply. Moline's gaze became intense. Passion was kindling in those dark, opaque eyes, and Merrick's moment had come.

"Sit down," said Merrick; and then, tapping Moline's knee by way of punctuating his words, he went on: "Jim Wool is a rat—a stool pigeon—a squealer. I have reason to know. I'd prefer his company to a skunk's, any night, but that's as far as I could discriminate. However, he came to me with a proposition. I'm on the inside in this town, and I had the necessary angle. I can forget a lot when I see the color of important money. I've got a man here in Innisfail—a big shot in the town—on a hot spot, and I know where to apply the screws and promote the deal. we made our terms."

Moline listened, watching steadily, his face expressionless.

"Now comes the pay-off," said Merrick. "That chisler's not playing through! I've got my own sources of information, and I've found that out. He's stacking both ends against the middle. While we're writing ourselves a commitment to stir, he plans to cop the paper, collect the reward like a demon detective, and leave us head first in the bag."

MOLINE was now full of a fury, a dangerous fury. But it was blind, unleashed, undirected. "So far, all I've heard is noises made by shooting off the mouth! Is that all there is to this?" he snarled.

"By no means!" drawled Merrick. He sat back, smiling. "Tell me this. Has Wool all the bonds in his possession?"

"All?"

"I'm just asking leading questions. I know he hasn't got them all. You see, he turned over one certificate to the police this afternoon."

"You lie!" snarled Moline, springing to his feet.

"I do, eh?" Merrick returned coldly. "Well, don't take my word for it. Ask Wool himself. Ask him for that bond. And when he can't produce it, try and make him account for it."

Moline stood thinking, weighing that challenge. Merrick eyed the telephone, nodded toward it, and said pleasantly, "Give him a ring and ask him up here. We're all friends together. He might explain to us also why he bought a reservation out of Innisfail on the midnight train tonight."

"He did that?—You know that?"

"Certainly I know it!" snapped Merrick. "You wanted facts. Now you've got a couple!" He paused. "What kind of a sucker play did you think you were making anyway, Moline? Why didn't you make it your business to get in touch direct with the man in this case? What do you know about him? What has Wool told you?"

An icy veil seemed to enclose Moline. He was calm, quiet, cool; the molten flow of his emotions had sunk

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to intenser, fiercer depths far out of sight.

"The man in the case—all these things—are no concern of mine," he said. "I'm here in town for my health. I don't know anything; I've got nothing to say. Whatever Wool has in hand is his own private angle, and the cops on my tail and tapping my line haven't a thing to show for their trouble. The subject of bonds was one which you brought up yourself. That's about all I'll have to say for a while this evening."

Merrick looked sarcastic, even a little contemptuous. He studied the man, then shrugged in hopeless disdain. "Have it your way! I thought we could do business. Naturally, I'm cutting my way out of this right now. I'm not going to worry about anybody who's left behind."

Moline moistened his lips. "Suppose," he said, "you come back here and have a talk again before you do anything?"

"When?"

"To-night. A little past twelve—After the midnight train is gone."

"Suits me! Half-past twelve. Time enough.

"And what," purred Moline, "did you say the name was?"

"Remember it," said Merrick from the door. "The name is—Smith!"

He departed, closing the door. He was smiling a small, hard smile.

CHAPTER IV.

HIS CHOSEN BONDAGE.

THE house was quiet when Merrick returned home and let himself in. He listened for an instant. The children were in bed, he knew; his wife, he felt, was elsewhere, for he felt her absence with the intuitive faculty of long and close intimacy.

He wished to be alone. Upstairs, he ransacked his wardrobe for old clothes; garments chiefly cherished for the cheerful let-down of fishing excursions. He selected an adequate outfit, and set to work on them with a razor blade, stripping them of every mark he could discover. Merrick could not be sure now of what avail these things might be. Time was marching; events were marching—both beyond any man's control.

One fact was certain; established beyond question, within this very hour. The man Moline knew no facts about the man who was Sam Bodine. Only Wool, in all Innisfail, knew. Only Wool.

Together "Sam Bodine" and Wool were due to leave Innisfail on the midnight train—to leave forever. Merrick, who had the remorseless, cold determination of a desperate man, and Wool, who owned a secret.

Assuredly, the night and its undetermined destiny were unknowable; but if they left Innisfail together at midnight, these two, one man alone, somewhere far to the eastward, would complete the grim and desperate journey.

Merrick laid aside the clothes and went to the desk. The night was his own, for he had successfully concealed all knowledge of these things so inexorably on the march—even from his observant wife, who knew him so well.

Merrick sat down, took pen and paper and began to write. The first words were:

You may never see me again . . .

It was a calm document he prepared. Only beneath the quiet words was it impassioned; she would appreciate the

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restraint, and the reason in it. He told her in full of those days seven and more years gone, when boundless ambition and forceful, overreaching talent led him so rapidly upward to meteoric success. Too swiftly for stability—but he was young.

He had been, he admitted, credulous, rash, overtrusting. He disclaimed no responsibility, yet the fact remained—he had been a simple victim for the shrewd, unscrupulous brains that had made such devastating use of him. There was an investment organization, ostensibly and apparently sound. There was a junior partnership for him, involving him in deep responsibility for all that followed. There were vast schemes and promotions—booming, lavish days and nights. He had accepted all these unquestioningly. There were guileful divisions of labor, secret frauds, and finally a morning of reckoning that blinded him with the sudden stark light of realization.

MERRICK protested that he had been unable to believe it. He stuck by his guns—by all their guns. He incriminated himself immeasurably and irreparably, unaware of the havoc he was wreaking upon himself. He had not believed it until the incredible day when a grand jury returned indictments for him, along with the others, specifying a joint felony for which he must inevitably be convicted and imprisoned. He was suddenly seeing clearly, and he knew it was too late.

He did not, he repeated, disclaim the responsibility. He should have known, he should have guarded with fiercer vigilance, the interests of all those who had relied on his integrity and who had lost so much. He was punished, ruined, cleaned—but he had evaded the hand of the Law and fled penniless and nameless, with his own conscience squared. He had committed no crime. Imprisonment was a superfluous lesson, after the worst was already done. He was a fugitive; he had chosen a bondage without release.

Thereafter, life had taken him in hand. His new success, his marriage, his happiness; for the most part, these things had happened to him. They had hardly been of his own seeking. Life had needed him, it seemed, and had taken him, brooking no denial.

. . . I shall be completely vanished. Don't look for me. I leave you everything. Secure your freedom as quickly as possible, and, for the sake of the children, disclaim any knowledge of me or where I've gone . . . In the wall safe you will find a bond certificate; take it to Gabe Miller in a day or two, and make him promise that he will not reveal where he got it . . . That is all. It is the end.

It was a cool, almost grim document, and only his wife would be able to read between its lines.

When he finished, Merrick placed the folded letter in a square envelope—an aristocratic looking envelope of laid paper, deckle edged. He sealed it, and on the face he wrote his wife's name, with the injunction that it was not to be opened until noon of the following day.

He propped the envelope against the inkwell on the desk and left it there. Then he went and got the automatic from the dresser and dropped it in a pocket of the old tweed coat he had selected. He went into his bathroom, and from the medicine cabinet he took a supply of roll cotton, and a small bottle of powerful household disinfectant with a carbolic acid base. These in another pocket. He then changed clothes completely, donning an old cloth cap and drawing it low on his

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eyes. Stealthily made his way out of the house.

He set out down town, walking at a steady, unhurried pace. The hour was still early.

THERE were not many people at the depot, close to midnight. Late restaurants and a few window displays along Market Street were still alight, but the station, withdrawn from the street, and on railroad property, was mostly in gloomy shadow.

At a corner of the building, where a watch could be kept on the street, a slight figure waited. It was Wool. He stared keenly at Merrick as Merrick halted before him. "Ready?" Merrick asked him.

Suspicion flickered over Wool's narrow face. There was arrogance there, too; a renewal of self-importance. "What's the idea of the get-up? You look like a bum."

"Roughly," admitted Merrick, "that was my intent."

"I see. You're going through with it?"

"It was your idea, Wool."

Wool rocked a little, sidling from one foot to the other in resentment and malice, his hands in his pockets and his shoulders hunched a little.

"All right, Merrick. You're doing the insisting. I'll take you back, and I'll pick up what I can for it. But that won't be the end, for I'm coming back here."

"You haven't forgotten the bond in my safe?"

"Listen, pal," Wool said venomously. "I'm a licensed detective. I've got privileges beyond any John Citizen. If there's a squawk about that bond, my license is my alibi, see? I'm an undercover man, and I'm after the crooks all the time, understand? In a pinch, all I need to do is nab them. What could be simpler? I picked this racket for a living because it's sure fire, either way—and no small town gee has outsmarted me yet!"

"Then you propose to tell my story here?"

"Think it over!" Wool grinned unpleasantly. "The dice are still rolling, sucker; and I'm doubling my bets."

Merrick nodded, inscrutable and bland. "We'll take the train," he said.

The blood was pounding on his temples, in his brain. The night was marching fast.

A car rolled into the depot plaza off Market Street, circling slowly about in the spacious driveway. It was a roadster, with the side curtains fastened in place. It coasted past the rear of the building, close to the curb on which Merrick and Wool waited, and calmly came to a stop beside the little man. The night was very still.

A side curtain of the roadster suddenly flapped aside.

A hand with a gun appeared, and the night rocked abruptly with flame and thunder.

Wool screamed. He stared into the flame, and into the face over the gun sights. He turned to run. It was as if a rope drew taut in his path; he took two steps and tripped headlong, sprawling with a peculiar looseness on the brick paving.

The thunder continued. Merrick tore the automatic from his pocket. The scorching fire from the roadster was being turned upon him now. Merrick fired point-blank into it.

The roadster gave a great leap, its motor racing, and sped across the drive for Market Street. Without a turn to right or left, it shot straight across, climbed the sidewalk, and piled into the

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front of a barber shop, to stop abruptly in a shower of shattered glass.

MERRICK set out at a run for the wrecked car. The street and the depot plaza were suddenly overrun with men who, seemingly, sprang from nowhere. One shouted at him. He cursed in reply, running. Another, nearer, caught at him, brought him to a halt. Merrick was on the point of swinging on the man with the gun butt, when he recognized the police uniform.

These men were all police, springing out from hiding. A trap had been set and sprung! Merrick stared, limp, astounded, stunned, firmly in the grasp of his captor, paying no heed to the threatening demands for an explanation.

Chief Gabe Miller himself relieved the situation. Miller came charing across the open space to peer into Merrick's face and utter a grunt of satisfaction.

"Fine work, Dan'l!" he said inexplicably. "Leave off, O'Brien—this is President Merrick!"

Merrick managed to say, "Gabe—what are your men doing here?"

"Lending a hand, Dan'l, lending a hand!" Miller said grimly. "You stay right close by me and answer nobody's questions till I talk to you privately."

He led the way quickly over to the stricken roadster, into which a group of police were already morbidly delving. Merrick followed, wordless. The night was marching on apace.

They found the man Moline—Portugee Johnny Moline, security shark and killer—stone dead in the wreckage. He had been shot through the head. That final race of the car across the plaza had been pure reflex action. They found also, on the floor of the roadster, a small satchel containing a bulky wad of bond certificates—Consolidated 1940's, ninety-nine in number.

On the depot platform, at the same moment, they were finding one James Wool, private detective, bullet ridden and dead where he fell.

It was a harvest for the Bannock morgue, for so long in the doldrums. In fact, it was a memorable night for all Bannock, and for the *Argus* in particular. Communication was immediately made with New York, and certain facts were established; and then there occurred a number of highly logical and incontrovertible conclusions which may here be recorded.

The man Moline, long suspected back east of complicity in the murder of the kidnaped messenger found in the gully, was finally adjudged guilty of the crime, chiefly on the overwhelming grounds of possession of the stolen bonds. There were other things, of course, but that was what clinched the case. For months he had been under observation, a fact of which he was nervously well aware.

A long distance telephone call a few days previous to the final dramatic climax was traced to Moline on the far end, and James Wool on the local end. Wool had summoned Moline to Innisfail, and James Wool appeared he had found some means of liquidating the loot. Moline then slipped out of town and joined him.

The nefarious plans of the pair, the *Argus* was able to announce with authority, had been frustrated by the shrewd and courageous action of one of Innisfail's foremost citizens, the president of the Bank of Innisfail. The *Argus* seized the opportunity to point out that a private citizen, working with his intelligence and nerve alone, had

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single-handedly succeeded where the entire police force of the town had abjectly failed.

BUT that all came out in the course of time. A very short while after the violent drama on the depot plaza—within the half-hour, in fact—Chief Gabe Miller led Merrick into his private office at the station and firmly closed the door. He bade the banker sit down, then he opened a box of cigars, lighted one carefully before he spoke.

"I warned you to silence, Dan'l, because I thought it better for you to take a little time and prepare a watertight story for yourself before talking to that *Argus* man."

Merrick watched the chief. He had obeyed the injunction. He dared not talk now. He had meddled with the ways of fate, and the fates were out of hand. He merely wondered. He could not fathom what was going on behind Gabe Miller's affable, complacent, pugnacious face. Within himself there was a cold, cold feeling—a gathering together for the final, irrevocable catastrophe.

He said slowly, "I'm not sure I'll care to have anything to say, Gabe."

"Yes, you will," assured Miller. "You won't get off that easy. This night is yours entirely."

Merrick sat forward in the chair a little tensely. "What happened to-night?" he demanded. "What brought you to the depot?"

Miller chuckled enjoying a good joke. "You know Jonas Galt, your neighbor across the street? He came to us to-day and told us all his suspicions of current date. He said you had talked with a stranger this morning—and later on, you went with that suspicious looking individual to the railroad station. Galt had seen you flash a gun on the man in the morning, and he made it his business to go and question the ticket agent, after you and the man made your visit. Then he came to us with the warning that our leading banker was leaving town between days, which he thought should warrant investigation in any man's town!"

Merrick smiled, more out of politeness than amusement. "I guess he's right."

Merrick waited.

MILLER blew a cloud of smoke at the ceiling and reached into his pocket for a letter. The envelope was torn across the top. He tapped it slowly against a finger.

"I'll tell you somewhat how it happened," he went on. "Jonas Galt's information wasn't all, naturally. I'd have ignored it. But that fellow Moline disappeared from our scrutiny to-night. We'd kept an eye on him, you know. He worried me some. I knew you were following an angle of your own, and it was dangerous. Your 'irrelevant curiosity' didn't fool me for a minute, Dan'l. To-night, it looked like something important was in the wind. I had to find out. I tried to get in touch with you—that was fairly late—but you were not at home. Couldn't find you anywhere by phone, so I took a run out to your house."

Merrick watched the letter in the chief's hands. It was in a square envelope—an aristocratic looking envelope of laid paper, deckle edged—and there was writing on the face, but no stamp. His throat was dry, but his drawling voice was even and firm.

"You did? That was after I left, doubtless," he said.

"You had gone, and your wife

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didn't know where. You were gone when she came home, she said. She looked, and said all your usual clothes were left behind. But your gun was gone. She was alarmed, and so was I. I asked to look around myself, and I did. I even had her open your wall safe. I had to find something, and I found that bond. I knew then that action was coming quickly. You had plans for the depot at midnight, by Galt's information. Precisely what you were doing I couldn't figure out; but I made similar plans on the instant, and placed a cordon around the station plaza, to be ready for whatever came. Then I let you play your hand to the limit."

"And," said Merrick, "you are satisfied?"

"Completely! I can well understand now—well, enough!" Miller tossed the envelope across the desk. He said gruffly, "I found that thing at the house. Fortunately, your wife overlooked it. I took it—and, under the circumstances, likewise the liberty of opening it. I put it in my pocket, and no one else has seen it. If I were you, now, I'd burn it quickly and be rid of it."

Merrick sat stiffly cold and uncomprehending.

"You read that letter?"

"Certainly I read that letter. Policemen have no compunctions about such things. I thought to find some information of bearing." He returned Merrick's stare, and his eyes were cunning and wise and kindly. He growled, "There wasn't a scrap of help in the letter anyway."

Merrick got to his feet. He stood steady, strong, but nonplussed. He shook his head. "I'm afraid—I'm rather afraid I don't get it, Gabe."

Miller came around the desk. He gripped Merrick's shoulder. Gruffly he said, "I knew everything in that letter a long time ago, Dan'l. I'm a little more attentive to my job than the editor of the *Argus* has any idea."

"And you let the matter ride?"

"And I let the matter ride."

"That's stretching friendship a lot farther than I dreamed could be done, Gabe."

"Friendship!" snorted Miller. He was indignant. "Friendship, my eye! I made up my mind for a sensible reason. I let it ride for the sake of the town of Innisfail!"

"For Innisfail!" echoed Merrick.

Suddenly the night ceased marching. The unknowable was gone, and there were familiar things again—things that were the real things, the hard things, the close things of life and living.

"I've made note," said Chief of Police Miller significantly, "that within eight months' time, the legal seven years allowed by the statute of limitations will outlaw that old indictment. You will be beyond its reach forever. On the night of that date, I want to have dinner with you. We'll be alone, and then you can tell me all about it and I'll be glad to listen. Right now, I want you to get back home this minute to your wife."

Merrick took a long breath. Slowly, he built a light on the tip of his cold cigar. Then, little by little, he began to grin. "Escape!" he said, and chuckled. "Gabe," he began, "there is no such thing as escape—"

"There isn't," agreed Gabe Miller. "But there *is* such a thing as parole!" And as he was pushing Dan'l Merrick through the office door, Miller added emphatically, "And on the way, when that *Argus* man crosses your path, you might take time to tell him and

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all Innisfail that its chief of police still knows best how to take care of his town!"

Dan Merrick laughed. Then he went down the stairs and back to his chosen bondage.

THE END.

Moroccan Jujutsu

THE white man who would attempt to use his fists to subdue a Moroccan Berber of the Atlas country or a Touareg would quickly encounter a disagreeable surprise. For the rough and tumble tactics of these races, used when weapons are broken or wrested away, are a combination of murderous kicks and quick holds and strokes more deadly than the Japanese anatomical method of wrestling, jujutsu. A kick, for instance, breaks a wrist or a leg five times out of ten; a punch never.

Unlike Parisian apaches, Moroccan Berbers and Touareg never kick at the face or breast of an adversary; they generally aim at the groin, a salient spot; or at the ankle, to break it.

Touareg swordsmen have a trick of kicking at the outthrust leg of an enemy swordsman while parrying a slash or a stroke. The split seconds needed by their antagonists to recover their balance enable them to bring home lightning thrusts or overhand counter-slashes.

In hand to hand fights the Moroccans excel in back of hand and finger blows against the neck and face of the adversary. Among the most efficient are the sharp thrusts of the thumb under the corner of the jaw, below the ear; the sharp blow with the back of the hand against the Adam's apple, on the sides of the neck behind and below the ears; all deadly or stunning devices, according to the force, rapidity and skill with which they are delivered.

To parry those sharp knocks, which are much worse than punches because the thin back of a hand can strike on all-important points usually protected by adjacent muscles and bones against the wider surface of a closed fist, it would be doubtful wisdom to lift one's hands or to attempt to jerk one's head out of range, because such defenses would inevitably be slower than the knock itself. The best way to get out of trouble is to crouch, throwing the legs apart like a sharply opened compass, so that the head bobs under the swinging hands of the adversary. While doing the leg-spread one can deliver a blow to the groin of the enemy and, luck assisting, end the struggle.

The Touareg have other head and neck holds and some peculiar arm and wrist motions, such as snapping the wrist upward and sideways while jerking the elbow and upper arm of the victim down and in the opposite direction. They are all tricks which fracture bones and tear ligaments.

All the various Moroccan and Touareg rough and tumble devices, which could fill a good sized pamphlet, are rendered almost irresistible by practice and speed. In most cases they secure the doom of adversaries muscularly stronger. That is why six-foot Negro Shereefian soldiers, powerful as gorillas, never care to engage in the R'bah with Moroccan hillmen of medium size.

Armand Brigaud.

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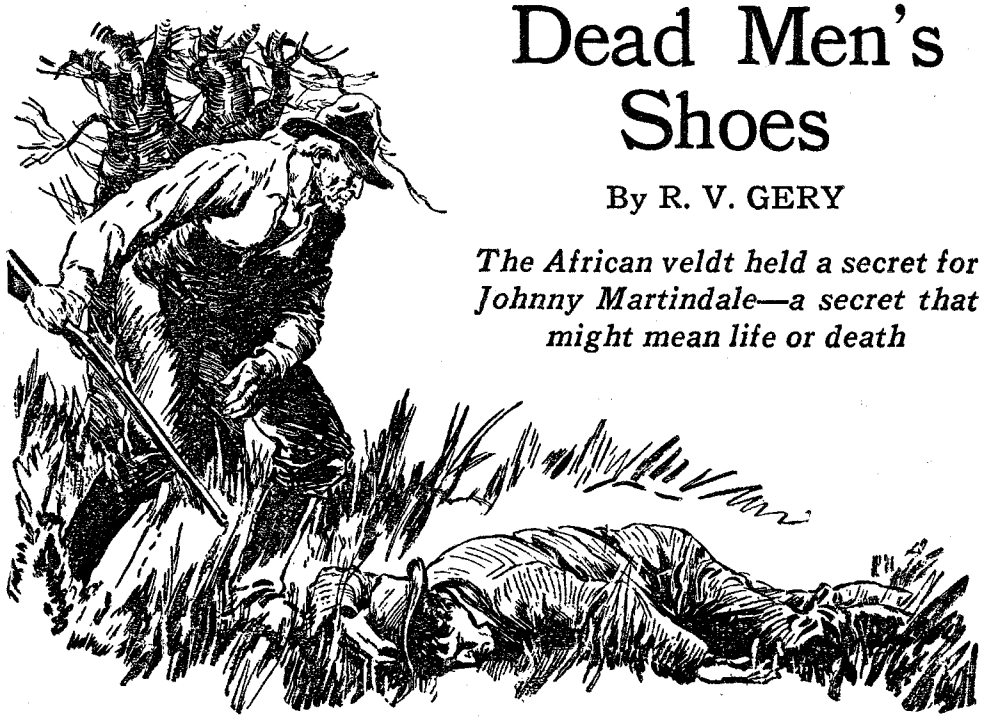
Dead Men's Shoes

By R. V. GERY

The African veldt held a secret for Johnny Martindale—a secret that might mean life or death



Stealthily the old man approached

HEAD down, shoulders hunched, feet dragging, Johnny Martindale slouched onward through the heat.

To right and left and behind him the Kalahari stretched for miles of shimmering desert, an awful sea of reds and blues and lurid yellows. For two days and a half he had dragged across it, alone, bloodshot eyes on the mountains in front. At their foot, somewhere this side of them, a man was waiting for him, unknowing of his advent.

Up there was Tom Cornwall; and in Johnny's pocket was a letter which said that if ever the time came when Hubert Martindale's son needed help or a resting place for the sole of his foot, Tom Cornwall would provide it. Once upon a time Hubert Martindale had done Tom a favor, and that was in Australia, out in the diggings behind Coolgardie. Now, in blazing Africa, Hubert Martindale's son was trekking to claim a promise from a man he had never seen.

"He'll look after me!" It had been running in Johnny's brain for days. "I'll be able to lose it up here!"

That was it—lose it. Johnny had something to lose. Something to win as well, and that was the free man's light back in his eye again, and the free man's swing to his shoulders. Johnny Martindale, away back in civilization, had made a mistake, and civilization after its fashion had exacted payment. Johnny wanted very badly to forget the taste of prison fare, the sound of prison keys.

He mouthed his hopeful, wistful words again through cracked lips.

"He'll look after me!"

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On he plodded, not daring to stop. Stopping would mean sitting down, or maybe lying down, and there was only one end to that. Keep up the plod-plod, rhythmic, desperate! Johnny's shoulders drooped lower and lower, his eyes glowed redder and redder, but he stuck doggedly to the trail.

It was sunset when he came within the far-flung shadow of the peaks, and saw with a gasp the beginnings of herbage again, and skeleton, haunted trees. Tottering, he clutched the stem of one, and shaded his eyes with an unsteady hand. Yes, there it was—by God, there it was! Green patches, grass, verdure. Clumps of trees not tortured fantastically. Water! Johnny could see it gleaming. He grinned twistedly, choked, staggered on. Soon he was in the grateful shade; he stopped and drank thirstily of a stream, looked about him in a daze, and then suddenly dropped all of a heap.

In ten seconds he slept.

A man emerged from the bushes and approached him cautiously. He was a great gnarled fellow of sixty or more, hawk-nosed, with a long upper lip and a stubbly, week-old beard. There was a rifle across his arm, and he was clad in the usual outfit of the wilderness, wide hat, flannel shirt, high boots.

A comfortable, competent figure enough, he seemed to be.

For a moment he stood watching the sleeping Johnny. Then he walked on tiptoe towards him and gently lowered himself to his side. His hand stole out, and with quick fingers he rifled Johnny's pockets, examining their few poor contents with a frown. Then he came to the letter and read it. An expression of puzzlement came over his face and he pursed up his lips in a soundless whistle. Carefully he replaced the letter, rose to his feet, and vanished once more in the trees.

IT was gray dawn when Johnny Martindale awoke, stiff, hungry and weary. He rolled over, rubbing his eyes. Then he jumped to his feet, for the tall man was looking at him from twenty yards away.

"Hello!" said Johnny thickly. "Who are you?"

The other advanced. "'Mornin'!" he said with gruff affability. "Been havin' it tough, eh?"

"P-pretty tough," Johnny said shakily. "This is a hell of a country!"

The man laughed, a great roaring bellow. "Yeah, she's hard on a chap that don't know her. Seen worse than this, though — yeah, there's Australy, now . . ."

"Australia!" Johnny Martindale stared at him. "You—you don't happen to be Tom Cornwall, do you?"

"My name, son. An' who may you be?"

Johnny fumbled hastily for the letter. "Martindale . . ." he began, but the big man interrupted.

"Why — why!" he said. "You're never Johnny Martindale, old Hubert's boy? Yeah, by jiminy, that's me own letter! Well, well, well!"

He thrust out his left hand, and Johnny grasped it, too ecstatic to wonder why he did not offer the right one.

"Lord, I'm glad to see you!" Johnny said. "Let me tell you what's been happening—"

Cornwall threw a supporting arm about his shoulders. "No, no!" he said. "It's easy to be seen things've not been goin' too well for ye, son! But we'll talk about that later. Come you here with me, an' we'll fix ye up!"

There was a house by the stream

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side, a neat-built place of scantling and thatch, with a wire fence about it and chickens pecking in the dust. Cornwall let out another of his bellows, and a weedy Kaffir came shambling round the corner, disappearing hastily at Cornwall's barked order.

"Come in, Johnny," his host said, "and treat yourself kind. I'm glad ye turned up here, by jiminy I am!"

Johnny ate and drank—the food was excellent, and there was good whisky—looking about him with interest. The little place was comfortable enough, and it was obvious that Tom Cornwall could afford to deny himself little.

He approved inwardly; here was the hideout he had been looking for. Five years up here, and—

He found Cornwall looking him over quizzically. "Suit ye, Johnny?" he asked. "It ain't much, but you're welcome to what there is of it!" He broke off and filled his pipe. "What's been happenin' to ye?" he asked all of a sudden.

Johnny told him, haltingly but missing nothing. Tom Cornwall clucked with his tongue.

"Too bad, son!" was all he said. "Reckon these things happen, though—an' it might have been me. I'm the last to hold anything like that agin ye!"

"Then—then you'd let me stay here?" Johnny asked doubtfully. "I... I..."

"Stay here?" Cornwall chuckled. "Well, I'd say so! Why not? O' course ye can stay here, long as ye please! I'm not handin' ye your hat—not Tom Cornwall, by jiminy! Not after Australy . . ."

Once again he clapped Johnny on the shoulder, and for the first time the younger man observed that his right hand was bloodstained, swathed in crude bandages.

"You're hurt!"

A sheepish expression appeared on Cornwall's hard face. "Yeah," he admitted. "Fool's trick o' mine—monkeyin' with the gun couple o' days ago. Blew three o' my fingers all to blazes. That's one reason I'm glad to have ye here, Johnny boy. This fin's goin' to be crippled for a bit." He made a rueful grimace. "Ye can help, quite a bit!"

"Count me in!" said Johnny. "Here, you'd better let me dress that for you properly. I've had some training in first aid."

"Ye don't say!" said Cornwall. "I'd be mighty glad to have ye do it, boy. She's sore enough, I don't mind tellin' ye."

Gently Johnny Martindale removed the wrappings, disclosing a sufficiently repulsive injury. The heavy .303 bullet had, as Cornwall had said, ploughed through three of the fingers, splintering the bones, and making a bloody pulp of the flesh. Johnny whistled at the sight.

"Whew!" he said. "When did this happen, did you say?"

"Day before yesterday," Cornwall told him. "I reckon them there fingers is about finished, eh? They don't look very good."

Johnny shook his head. "Done for, I'm afraid," he said. "There's nothing to be done but trim them up and keep things clean. We'll do what we can."

With hot water and antiseptics from a medicine chest he set to work, while Cornwall grimaced stoically with the pain. At the end of the proceedings he looked down at the neatly bandaged hand.

"Thankye, Johnny," he said,

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"You're goin' to be useful, sure enough!"

SO Johnny Martindale took his abode with Tom Cornwall up there on the Kalahari, and rested and grew easy again in mind and body. His duties about the little house were light — little beyond attending to his host's injured hand, which healed slowly and with difficulty. The three fingers, as Johnny had feared, were a total loss; mere stumps, without power or flexibility.

Nevertheless, Cornwall busied himself about the place, growing a crop of mealies with the help of the ancient Kaffir, and now and again faring out with the rifle to kill an antelope for the pot. Johnny observed that he was quite luxuriously inclined; his larder was stocked with expensive cans, and there was a pile of whisky cases that steadily diminished. Moreover, there was actual cash as well—rather startling sums of it, Johnny discovered, in greasy notes and even gold coin. Cornwall kept it in a cash-box buried under the floor, and winked expressively at Johnny over his obvious hiding place.

"No banks hereabouts," he observed. "Got to keep one's stuff where one can. It's as well we don't see many strangers this way!"

Johnny laughed. He was puzzled, for what was in that cash-box never came from growing mealies, and Tom Cornwall seemingly had no other occupation. But he asked no questions; adversity had taught him the error of unnecessary curiosity. He was content enough that his protector should be thus well equipped, without pressing for an explanation.

One job Johnny Martindale found himself performing. On the second day of his sojourn, Cornwall a little sheepishly produced a razor.

"I'd be glad if ye'd keep me smooth, Johnny," he said. "It's a habit of mine, an' with these here fingers I'd make a poor fist of it . . ."

So Johnny shaved him, twice a week, and thought no more of it. He was beginning to be profoundly satisfied with his lot, and grateful to Tom Cornwall in corresponding measure. If the old man was queer, and had inexplicable ways, why, that was no affair of his.

Let well alone and keep a still tongue, was an excellent motto for Johnny Martindale.

Queer in several respects Tom Cornwall was. The money was one, and Johnny found it difficult to avoid curiosity in that regard. He got a glimpse into the cash-box one day, and concluded that there must be some hundreds of pounds—maybe thousands—there. And there were other things as well. Cornwall began taking two- and three-day trips up into the mountains, alone. To Johnny he explained that there were chiefs up there with whom he had business. Mysterious Kaffirs took to arriving at night, whispering with Cornwall out of Johnny's hearing, and vanishing by morning. Cornwall never referred to these visits at all, but Johnny found him silent and preoccupied for a day or so after them.

AFTER one such midnight confabulation, Cornwall came shouldering his way into the house and stirred Johnny from his bunk.

"Listen!" he said. "I've got to go, boy! There's trouble up yonder in the hills among the Kaffirs, an' they've sent for me to put it right. You stay here, an' look out for the place. I'll be gone about four days, I reckon."

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"Right," said Johnny. "I'll see to it. Anything special wants doing?"

Cornwall looked down at him peculiarly. "Why, no, Johnny," he said. "Nothin' as I knows of. Tell ye what, though—" He broke off, fingering his chin. "There's some o' these busybody police liable to be round here soon—every three months or so they show up—an' I'm not so durned anxious to have 'em shovin' their noses into my concerns. If one o' those turns up, you don't know nothin', see? Oh yeah, an' while you're about it, s'pose you take a blanket an' hang it on the tree there, like washin'. Take it in if one o' these chaps comes, an' put it back when he's gone. Get me?"

"Why — why, what's in the wind, Tom?" Johnny raised himself on one elbow to stare at Cornwall. The big man laughed.

"Business, Johnny—just business!" he said. "One o' these days mebbe ye'll be told, but till then ye don't know nothin', an' that's the handiest way of it, by jiminy!"

He reached into a corner for his rifle. "Don't ye forget, now!" he said. "I don't want to run into one o' these police — never mind me reasons — so you look out for that blanket, eh?"

He moved to the door. "You're not going now?" Johnny called after him. "It's midnight, man!"

For all answer, Cornwall chuckled and passed out into the darkness. Johnny Martindale sat for a moment with dropped jaw, looking after him. Then he got out of bed, and began to pace up and down the room, thinking hard.

Dawn found him still puzzling. There was mystery here, somewhere—though where, was another matter. Cornwall had something to conceal, eh? Something he was not anxious for the police to nose into. He was expecting a police visitor, and had therefore cleared out, leaving Johnny to play the innocent know-nothing. So much was obvious, and so much, until daylight, was all Johnny got out of his ponderings. He went about his trivial tasks mechanically, not forgetting to hang the blanket as Cornwall had ordered.

Then—more for occupation than for any other reason—he set himself to tidy and sweep the house.

He had done it before, many times; but now he made a complete job of it, ferreting into corners, and dragging out litter and rubbish, discarded garments, and ancient hats. He was making a pile of it to burn outside when something caught his eye and he stooped and picked it up.

It was a worn old boot—one of a pair of soft-tanned *veldtschoen,* ragged and dilapidated, with snapped ties and gaping seams. There was nothing in that; any back-blocks house might supply the like. But there was one peculiarity about it; it had a three-inch wooden sole, clumsily contrived and attached. The wood was worn, even as the leather. The man who had owned this shoe had had a deformity—one leg shorter than the other.

So Cornwall had had another white up here, eh? His own feet were regular enough, as Johnny knew from having laced his boots time and time again while his smashed fingers healed. This must be someone else. Who?

He stood considering, with the shoe in his hand and the fire burning before him, until the sound of hoofs made him toss the thing into the flames and turn round. The figure he had been expecting was emerging from the trees — a trim-uniformed constable, with a led horse trotting behind his

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own. Johnny stepped back and pulled down the blanket.

THE newcomer swung himself to earth and advanced to meet Johnny.

"Hello!" he said in evident surprise. "Stranger, eh? What's your name, d'ye mind?"

Johnny told him guardedly, and the policeman nodded.

"Where's Cornwall?" he asked.

"Gone up in the hills," said Johnny. "Got some business with the Kaffirs there—some palaver or other with the chiefs, he said. Be away the inside of a week, he told me. I don't know much about these things. I'm new here."

The constable grinned. "That's easy seen!" he said. "So Cornwall's away, eh? That's a pity. He was away the last time I was here, too—before you joined him, I reckon. Bit of a nuisance, too. There's an affair I want to talk over with him."

"Can I do anything for you?" Johnny asked.

"Come inside," said the policeman. "I guess I might as well tell you I'll have to have some particulars about you."

"Particulars! Johnny's past came back to him in a flood, and he colored. The constable looked at him sharply.

"Like that, eh?" he said. "Well, let's hear!"

Johnny Martindale told him—a plain unvarnished tale, without holding anything back. "You've nothing on me," he ended defiantly.

The constable looked up from his notebook, where he had been making a couple of entries. Johnny observed with relief that he was smiling.

"Nothing whatever," he said. "It's just as well you were straight with me, Martindale. That story of yours clears you of this business. It'll be easy enough to check it, although I'm not doubting your word. No, I don't want you."

"Who do you want, then?"

"I don't know," confessed his visitor. "You've seen nothing suspicious round here, I suppose. No strangers—no hide-and-seek affairs, eh? I might as well admit there's I. D. B. somewhere in this district."

"I. D. B.?"

"Illicit Diamond Buying!" grinned the constable. "Shows you're a greenhorn in Africa, asking the question. Picking up stray diamonds from the Kaffirs and sneaking them out of the country. It's against the law—very much against the law. And there's a leak hereabouts. We've traced it. That's what I wanted to see Cornwall about."

"You don't suspect him?"

"Him?" The policeman seemed genuinely surprised. "Tom Cornwall I. D. B.? Not he! He's not that sort. D'you think he is, yourself?"

Johnny was calculating very fast now. Well, it was none of his business once more, if that was what was taking Tom Cornwall on these mysterious trips of his.

And if the law caught him, then Johnny's own congenial hide-out up here was gone—

"No, I don't!" he replied to the policeman. "Last thing I'd suspect him of."

"Same here. Well, you've seen no one else, eh?"

Again Johnny Martindale made a rapid decision. He was thinking of that worn shoe. After all—

"No!" he said. "I've been here a couple of months, and Tom Cornwall's the only white I've seen anything of."

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"And he's away in the hills for a week?"

"Yes!"

"Very good!" The constable closed his notebook with a snap and rose. "Well, I can't do anything here, then. I'll be getting on. No, no drinks, thanks—don't go with this job of mine. Nice of you to offer it, though. Fond of a tot, old Cornwall is, eh?"

"Certainly is!" said Johnny with a smile. The constable held out his hand in a friendly gesture.

"Good-by, Martindale. Keep your chin up, and keep your eyes skinned for any suspicious characters round here, won't you? I'll be back in three months or so."

He swung himself lightly into the saddle and was away with a wave of the hand. Johnny Martindale watched him out of sight, thoughtfully. Then he went across to the tree and replaced the blanket on it.

"I. D. B.!" he said to himself as he returned to the empty house. "So that's it, eh, Tom? Well, you're a nice old hypocrite, anyway. Still, it's no business of mine, again. I'm not going to blow on you—not I!"

HE threw himself into a chair on the veranda and produced a pipe. Until late on in the afternoon he sat there, thinking; but his thoughts were not so much on Cornwall's irregularities as on the other man who had been here. Whose shoe was that, with the clumped sole and the clumsy sewing?

The thing had not been an old one, either; it had been worn within the year, Johnny could have sworn.

With the failing light the old Kaffir servant came to him for orders. Johnny told him to prepare supper for the two of them, and strolled idly down to the stream, bucket in hand, for water.

There had been a well dug in the clayey bank, just deeply enough to dip the bucket. Johnny stooped to it—and then he remained in a crouching position, staring.

At the water's edge the mud was trampled and churned, where he himself, and before him Tom Cornwall, had stood day after day on this same errand. Johnny had seen that mud hundreds of times now, hard, brown about its borders, cracked by the summer heat; but until now he had not set eyes on the third set of tracks. Faint, overtrodden and criss-crossed, they were unmistakable with their deformed outline of a clumped foot. The wearer of *veldtschoen* had stood at this water-hole, and recently — within four months or so, since the spring rains.

Johnny Martindale remained where he was, bucket in hand, for a long minute.

Then he rose and went slowly back to the house. A further surprise awaited him. Tom Cornwall was sitting in the veranda.

"Back again, ye see!" he said, showing yellowed teeth in a grin.

"You're early," Johnny said.

"Yeah. Them fellers up yonder settled their squabbles, an' sent a messenger down to turn me back. Got some sense sometimes, even Kaffirs have. That fool policeman been here?"

"Yes, he was here," said Johnny. "Looking for you, too, Tom."

Cornwall chuckled. "Don't doubt it!" he said caustically. "Well, what'd ye tell him?"

"Said you were up in the hills for a week, on a palaver with the chiefs."

"Humph! What's he say?"

"Nothing much. Said he was sorry

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and so on, but he'd have to be getting along. There's I. D. B. up here, he told me."

Johnny was watching Cornwall intently as he made the last announcement, but the big man never winked an eyelash.

"I. D. B., eh?" he said. "That's serious. An' you told him you didn't know a thing about that, eh?"

"I even had to ask him what I. D. B. meant," said Johnny, and Cornwall shook with silent laughter.

"Well, well!" he said. "There's somethin' in bein' pretty innocent, now and again, ain't there, Johnny? Comes in useful, eh?"

He got up and went into the house in search of his inevitable whisky bottle. A moment later he was out again, his broad face like a thundercloud.

"What's all this? Who's been a housemaidin' round here?" he demanded. "You?"

"Why—yes!" said Johnny. "I did a bit of clearing up. Any objection?"

"Objection? Ob . . . Lookee here, you young pup, you leave my trappin's alone, d'ye hear? Just because ye're useful now an' then, that's no reason why ye should go meddlin' the minute I've me back turned. I like this place just as it is, see?" He dropped his scowl for a moment. "What'd ye do with the stuff?"

"Burnt it," said Johnny. "There's the ashes out yonder."

"That policeman see any of it?"

"No. It was done before he turned up."

"Ah! Well, that's better." Cornwall seemed relieved. "But you let things alone from now on, Johnny, an' I'll be obliged to ye, d'ye see?"

Johnny considered him carefully. "Tom," he said suddenly, "hadn't you better let me in on things?"

"Let you in?" Cornwall took his pipe out of his mouth. "What d'ye mean?"

"Why, on this little game of yours. You fooled me for a long time, Tom, but I'm wise now. You're running diamonds, Tom, eh?"

Cornwall regarded him with wide-open eyes. "Well, damme!" he said. "An' what makes ye think that, son?"

His tone was bantering, but there was an edge of menace in it. Johnny temporized.

"Why—well—" he said hesitantly, "there's these trips of yours up in the hills . . . and the Kaffirs . . . and the money . . . It's easy seen, Tom!"

"Sherlock Holmes, eh?" Cornwall sneered. "Well, boy, for once ye're not so far off right. What d'ye figure doin' about it?"

Johnny laughed. "Why, nothing, Tom! Help you, if I can. You've been a pretty square shooter with me, y'know!"

Cornwall continued to gaze at him speculatively. "Humph!" he said. "Help me, eh? That's kind o' ye, Johnny—I take that mighty kind. An' I'm not sayin' you won't be useful, boy, either, stallin' these police fellers off an' so on. Yeah, I'll take ye on, mebbe. Gets kind o' lonely up here without some one—"

"Were you alone long, Tom?" Johnny asked the question delicately.

"Eight year," said Cornwall. "Long time, eh?" His irritation seemed to have left him now and he was smoking placidly, glass in hand.

"It sure is," said Johnny, rising. "It sure is, Tom!"

IT was an hour or more later, and evening was falling, when Johnny Martindale slipped out of the house and down to the stream. He left Corn-

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wall snoring vigorously in the veranda, overcome by his last night's wanderings and half a dozen stiff jolts of spirits.

A further look at those *veldtschoen* tracks was what he was after.

He found them readily enough now. They were daylight clear when you knew what to look for, all about the water-hole. Tom Cornwall's tale of an eight-year solitude went up in smoke as Johnny considered their frequency and freshness. A new and somehow sinister light began to surround the old man up there in the chair.

Had he had a partner? If so, then why that tale of eight years' loneliness? What had come to that unknown with the club foot? Had he—Johnny shivered a little — known too much? About I. D. B., for instance?

He glanced round nervously, but there was nobody in sight. Then he resumed his thoughtful inspection of the tracks.

They were here, there and everywhere, an inextricably tangled muddle of prints, but entirely unmistakable. Johnny hunted round for a perfect impression, and finally came on one out on the tiny shelf of mud that formed the brink of the stream itself. The *veldtschoen* man had walked this way with his lumbering, dot-and-carry-one tread.

And — Johnny Martindale whistled all of a sudden—Tom Cornwall had walked after him. Here were his footsteps also, clear and perfect, superimposed now and again on the others. Johnny put his bucket down and began to trace this little drama up the riverside.

For a hundred yards or more they led close to the water. Then through a clump of bushes and out on the flats again, the deformed foot limping, Cornwall's heavy tread inexorably following it. There was a group of tall trees right ahead, and the river plunged into their shade with a babble over rocks. Johnny Martindale hesitated a moment, checked by the atmosphere of the place. Then he took his courage in both hands and marched forward into the darkness, glancing about him.

At first there was nothing—only the tree stems and bushes with an eerie light falling through them from without. Apparently there had been no regular track here, and Johnny found himself wondering what it was had taken the *veldtschoen* man and Tom Cornwall in here of all places. Then his eye fell suddenly on a dull gleam of metal, deep amid decaying leaves in the very heart of a thorn bush.

He thrust his fingers in and with difficulty drew it out. It was a .303 brass cartridge case, scarcely corroded at all.

With the thing in his hand, Johnny Martindale stood stock still. A spent .303 shell might mean anything — or nothing. But here . . . And then he saw something else.

Deep in the bushes, almost indistinguishable in that faint twilight, some one had stirred the virgin earth. Its surface was tossed and piled into a hummock, and over the hummock rocks from the stream bed had been heaped. But jackals had been at work under those rocks, and there was a gleam of white protruding. Johnny advanced, fascinated.

A sound behind him, and he whipped about. He was looking straight down the muzzle of the 3.03 rifle.

"Say your prayers, son!"

The cold eyes blazed murderously,

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the mouth had tightened into a cruel slit.

"Say your prayers, ye young . . ."

THERE was a whiplash crack somewhere in the bushes, and a look of pained surprise suddenly appeared on the man's face. He staggered, dropped his rifle, and pitched loosely to earth as the young policeman emerged from the trees, holstering his pistol.

"Thanks, Martindale!" he said. "That was very nice!"

"Wh-what's it all about?" Johnny asked. "Did C-Cornwall k-kill him?" His eye strayed to the desecrated grave.

"Cornwall!" said the policeman. "No, Cornwall didn't kill him. Tom wouldn't have killed a fly. That's him, there!"

He pointed to what lay under the stones, and Johnny gasped.

"Then—then who's this?" he asked.

The policeman turned the dead man over with his foot and fumbled at his uniform pocket.

"I think I can tell you," he said grimly, extracting a folded sheet of paper. "Look here!"

The document was a police poster, with "WANTED!" across the top in flaring capitals. Under it was a photograph of a large, bearded man, and the name, "William Lasher."

"That's Lasher, all right," said the constable. "He was wanted for plenty besides murder and I. D. B., you'll notice. He's shaved his beard off, of course . . ."

Johnny began to laugh a trifle hysterically. "No," he said. "I shaved it for him, when he smashed those fingers of his."

"H'm!" said the policeman. "Well, you probably owe your life to that, my young friend. As it is, he nearly had you. What put you on the trail of that thing there?" He nodded at the grave.

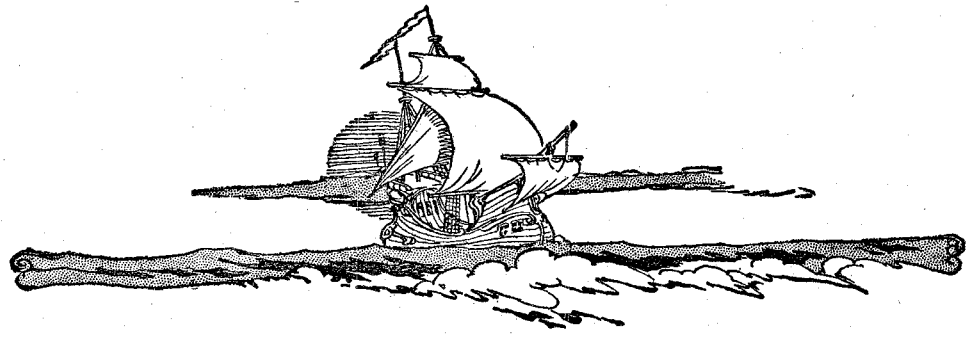
Johnny told him, and asked another question in his turn. "What brought you back?"

"I never went," said the policeman. "You told me this chap was fond of his tot, and I saw the whisky cases. Tom Cornwall was a teetotaler. Simple, eh?" He picked up the rifle and turned to go. "Come on!" he said. "There's a reward out for this fellow, Martindale, and you'll get half of it, sure. It's not every one would have followed up that clew of yours, you know!"

He chuckled as they cleared the edge of the fateful little wood.

"Dead men's shoes, by Jove!" he said.

THE END.



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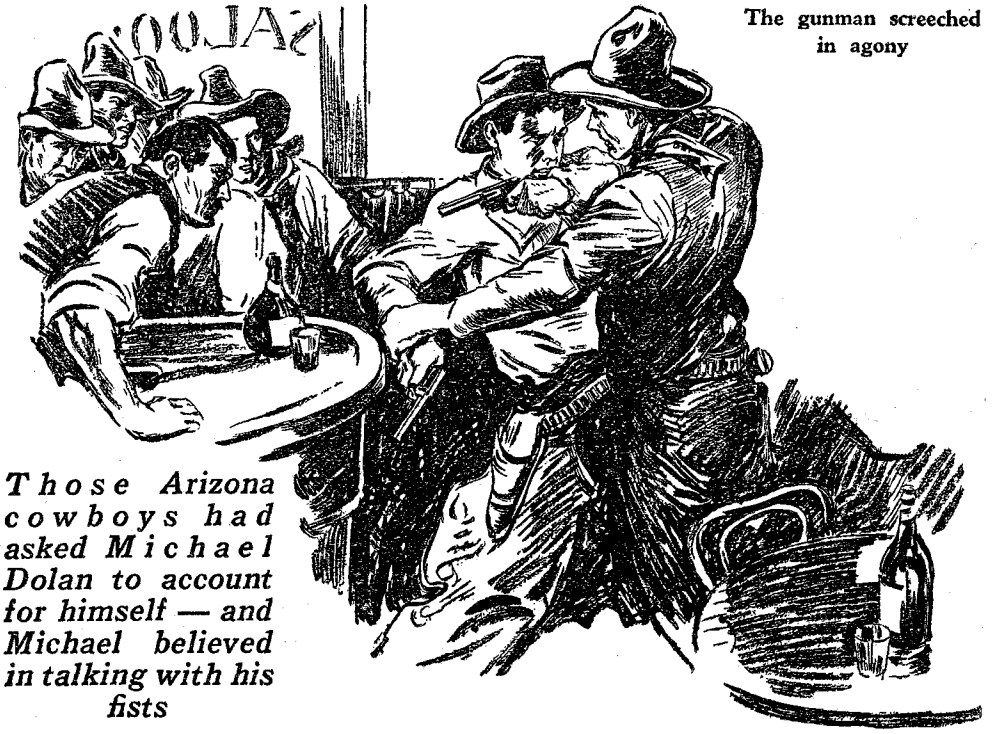

The gunman screeched in agony

Those Arizona cowboys had asked Michael Dolan to account for himself — and Michael believed in talking with his fists

Clear the Trail*

By CHARLES ALDEN SELTZER

LEADING UP TO THIS INSTALLMENT

ABOUT the only unusual thing in Michael Dolan's young life before he left Wyoming was the fact that he had served for six months as the sparring partner of the heavyweight boxing champion when the latter was vacationing in the cattle country. Michael knew, and the champ knew, that at the end of those six months Michael was the better of the two, but they kept their knowledge to themselves, each for reasons of his own.

Then came the day when Michael learned of the death of his uncle, Dave Dolan, and the bequest which gave Michael all of Dave's property in Arizona. Expecting to find nothing of value and more from a sense of duty than anything else, Michael started toward the Southwest. He stopped in Denver just long enough to pick up some traveling money by knocking out Cyclone Rinello, then went on to Albuquerque and established his claim to his inheritance. There also he purchased the horse of the recently killed outlaw, El Tigre, and found that he looked so much like the departed bandit that people mistook him for El Tigre.

Going on to the Dolan ranch, near the Mexican border, Michael came to a ranch building where an American, Latimor, was abusing a Mexican woman. Dolan whipped Latimor and sent him on his way, then learned from the woman, Señora Vergez, that the house in which she and her husband and daughter lived was but one of the outposts of the huge

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Dolan domain, comprising thousands upon thousands of acres.

Since people took him for El Tigre, Dolan did not disillusion them, especially after Señora Vergez told him how a gang of bandits, headed by Vanio Talis, was scheming to get control of the Dolan lands and to murder Michael Dolan when he appeared to claim his rights.

Dolan met Talis, was accepted as a henchman, and was told to meet Talis in the town of Diablo in two days. When Talis left, Dolan heard a sound in the brush near by and found a girl staring at him. She had fallen and imprisoned her foot in the crotch of a tree.

He discovered that she was Mary Andress, described by Talis as the "hellcat" in charge of the Dolan properties until the heir arrived. Michael released her and took her to the main ranch, where he was greeted coldly, as El Tigre, by Larry, the foreman, and the rest of the Square D cowboys.

Suddenly there is a flurry of excitement in the ranch yard. The Vergez family is accusing Latimor, also a Dolan foreman, of abusing the Vergez girl. Dolan steps up to face the surprised Latimor.

CHAPTER XIII.

DOLAN MAKES HIS TALK.

"YOU know me, eh?" Dolan said to Latimor.

Into Latimor's eyes came a curious glint. Fear. He took one step backward, then as if changing his mind he halted, stood rigid. He dropped the knife and stood there, staring at Dolan, his fingers working as if they might descend to the gun at his hip. Mary Andress knew that a terrible indecision had seized him.

"I didn't finish my job," said Dolan. "I should have known you would go back to the Vergez shack."

He was standing close to Latimor now, having slowly advanced while he had been speaking. His right fist moved upward so rapidly that its movement could not be followed. There was a splitting crash and Latimor's big body slumped forward. He fell limply, face downward in the dust. For an instant Dolan stood, looking down at him, then he stooped, drew the big man's six-shooter from its holster, turned and handed it to Larry, who stared at it in amazement as if this were the first six-shooter he had ever seen. There was now no smile on Dolan's lips. He stood near the center of the ring of men gazing down at Latimor, ignoring the others.

He had struck Latimor a terrific blow; an uppercut that had crashed against the big man's jaw, snapping his head back almost to his shoulder blades. It was a long time before Latimor regained his senses, and during the man's period of unconsciousness Dolan stood with folded arms watching him. No one said anything.

At last Latimor stirred. He pushed his huge body to a kneeling posture, and with his hands resting on the ground, stared around in bewilderment. He rested in that position for a few minutes, slowly wagging his shaggy head from side to side, and then his gaze rested on Dolan.

"You hit me again, eh?" he said.

"I was hoping that one would break your neck," answered Dolan. "I put everything I had into it."

Latimor felt for his gun and sneered when he found it missing.

"Took it from me?"

He seemed undecided as to whether he should stay down or get to his feet. He blinked at the Square D riders and scowled at the Vergez family kneeling at the edge of the ring. It must have seemed that the men of the outfit of which he had been foreman had no sympathy for him, for he sneered

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again, and for a moment hung his head as if thinking the situation over. Then he got up, swiftly, giving all the spectators the impression that he had been shamming weakness and grogginess.

HE rushed at Dolan and was met with a terrific right hand punch to the side of his heavy face that made his knees sag. He lunged wildly only to be struck on the other side of the face with such force that he stood erect, shuddering. He grunted, lunged again and ran into a fist that smashed his lips as if they had been struck with a sledge hammer. This blow dazed him and he pawed wildly with his ham-like hands in a frenzied effort to ward off other blows that were thudding against his head from all angles.

Dolan was methodical, deliberate. The savage force of his blows was not reflected in his face, for he seemed to be applying punishment to the big man as if he had no personal feeling in the matter.

The sight was too much for Mary Andress. Into a silence which was disturbed only by the musical jingle of Dolan's spurs, the slithering of sand, the thudding and crashing of Dolan's fists landing and the occasional shrieks of the Vergez family, her voice rose in frantic protest.

"Stop it! Stop it! Please stop it! El Tigre! Stop, please!"

Perhaps Dolan heard her voice, for he seemed to steady himself, balancing himself in front of Latimor. Then his right arm flashed and the fist thudded heavily against Latimor's jaw. Latimor was knocked sideways to fall into another blow that reached him from that direction. Back and forth the big man's head was battered, rocked by one blow to meet another from the opposite direction until his great legs began to bend forward, his arms dropped to his sides and his chin went to his chest. Helpless, a huge mass of quivering flesh, he stood trying to brace his legs to keep from falling. Then Dolan stepped back. No trace of passion was visible in him. It was as if he felt no emotion at all. But his eyes, as he gazed around at the circle of faces, were still gleaming with a light of cold intensity. His gaze finally went to Larry.

"You can have him now," he said.

He turned, walked through the ring of Square D riders, mounted El Rey and rode away, over the level and into the wilderness country west, toward the trail that wound its undulating way through the hills toward Diablo.

For many minutes following Dolan's departure there was silence on the level. Latimor had sunk to his knees, and his hands were dragging in the sand. Mary Andress had covered her eyes with her hands. The Vergez family watched vindictively.

Larry looked at a Square D rider who was standing next to him.

"Hell and blazes!" he whispered, awe in his voice. "El Tigre sure made his talk, didn't he?"

THE wilderness swallowed Michael Dolan. Deep in the darker recesses of the forest at the bottom of the valley he halted at a stream—the same stream that ran through the corral at the Dolan ranch—dismounted, threw the reins over El Rey's head and knelt beside the water. The knuckles of his hands were bruised, the hands themselves were swollen. He bathed them for a while.

A cold, deadly, savage impulse had driven him to attack Latimor. The man's treatment of the Vergez girl

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aroused in him contempt and disgust. Curiously, he had not punished Latimor for that crime. The savagery that he had exhibited had sprung from a strange and inexplicable hatred of the man. Latimor's grossness, his brutishness, the sensuality of his piggish eyes, Dolan presumed, was the cause of his hatred and of his overpowering desire to hit the man.

Not for long, however, did Dolan dwell upon the incident of Latimor's chastisement. The man was not worth thinking about. Dolan's thoughts, as he again mounted El Rey and rode through the country, which was solemnly beautiful in the dying sunlight, were of Mary Andress. A brave girl. Brave physically as well as morally. What communion of interest had existed between Mary Andress and Dave Dolan he had no means of knowing, nor did he know why Dave Dolan had brought the girl into this wilderness, nor why she had stayed after coming. He could not even guess her reason for staying now, after Dave Dolan had died. She could not hope to profit by the will, for Dave Dolan had bequeathed all his possessions to his nephew, Michael Dolan. Was the girl staying on at the ranch for the purpose of endeavoring to hold it intact until the heir arrived? There might be something in that. Perhaps Dave Dolan had exacted such a promise from Mary before he died.

She certainly didn't like outlaws. She knew and appreciated the menace of them. She didn't like Michael Dolan either. She had made that plain to him, yet she had exhibited some interest in him and some concern for his safety. That was natural. A woman's nature.

He now considered Michael Dolan's feelings. Cold bloodedly he analyzed them. He knew his impulses were romantic, but he had no disturbing thoughts about Mary Andress. She was a beautiful girl, but he was not in an ecstatic mood over her. He had been unaware of any change in himself over meeting her. He had enjoyed looking at her and had felt a pleasant satisfaction while riding with her. That was all.

Yet as he rode toward Diablo he was disturbed by the constantly recurring images of her that flashed in his mental vision. He saw her as when he had first caught sight of her looking at him through the green foliage of the trees. Her straight, probing glances, seeking knowledge of his character. The tilt of her head when she had been reproving him for being an outlaw. What difference could it make to her? Just a natural and normal desire for people to be good, decent citizens of the world? He saw again the seductive curves of her cheeks and throat, the indescribable feminine beauty and charm of the nape of her neck with straying wisps of hair snuggling it.

"Shucks," he said aloud. "I wasn't thinking I'd remember things that well."

CHAPTER XIV.

MURDER.

THE group of Square D cowboys and Mary Andress had momentarily forgotten Latimor and the Vergez family in their astonishment over the sudden departure of the man they knew as El Tigre. He had so completely dominated the drama which had been enacted that when he rode away it seemed there was a perceptible lessening of interest and a swift return to the commonplace at-

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mosphere which reigns over a group of people of ordinary strength of character.

They all stood, watching El Rey and his rider as he rode away from them over the level. And then the rider who stood next to Larry expressed the feelings and emotions of all.

"Holy smoke!" he said. "Larry Allan, sure as hell I feel just like I would feel if a cyclone struck this outfit and then moved on, leaving a vacuum behind it. He made his talk, and he made it damned complete. He's a wolf for sure."

Larry gazed after El Tigre thoughtfully. He turned and looked at Mary Andress. Something in the girl's attitude stirred him to a vague wonder and sympathy. "Doggone," was his thought, "he's got her millin' too. Now what in blazes is there about a man that makes you regret he's leavin' you when you've only known him about ten minutes? Mary's feelin' it, too." He slowly shook his head and returned his gaze to the vanishing El Tigre.

As if moved by a common impulse all the riders had faced the west. The circle had dissolved; the men had moved away from their previous positions and were standing in an irregular line west of the scene of the recent conflict.

A shriek of agony from behind them caused them to turn quickly, to see Latimor, still on his hands and knees. He had lifted his head and his eyes were wide with terror and pain. The hilt of a knife—Pedro Vergez's knife—was projecting from the middle of his back, and Pedro's hand was gripping the hilt of the knife. Retribution had overtaken Latimor. Larry turned at Latimor's shriek and his heavy six-shooter leaped into his right hand and was leveled instantaneously at Pedro. But the damage had been done. His face working with demoniac rage, Pedro wrenched the knife free and faced the staring Square D riders, and Mary Andress, who had screamed.

"Shoot if you like!" defied Pedro. "I'm even weeth thees man. I don't care what you do!"

There was little that any one could do now. For Latimor slowly sank face down into the dust. Pedro braced himself for a shot from Larry Allan's gun. But the shot did not come. Larry knew, as did all of them, that Latimor could not have lived long in that country. There were a dozen men in the Square D outfit who would have killed Latimor before he could escape from their presence. For them, El Tigre had not completed his work.

Larry holstered his six-shooter. He looked at Vergez.

"Get out of here, quick!" he ordered. He turned to Mary Andress, his voice softening.

"You go back into the house, ma'am," he said. "I reckon there ain't anything to be done. Latimor only got what was comin' to him."

Mary obeyed. Pedro, his wife and daughter, vanished quickly. For a time Larry and the Square D men stood around, talking, and then they bore Latimor away. They had no word of criticism now. It was not their way to speak in derogation of the dead. An hour later with the kerosene lamps in the bunk and mess houses flickering against the shadows of the dusk they were laughing and joking with each other as if nothing unusual had happened. Only once was the incident referred to. A tall, slender, black haired rider, with cold, steady eyes, spoke to another rider.

"Seems like when that guy decides

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to do a thing he does it sudden—and complete."

The other rider apparently knew to whom the black haired man referred, for he nodded.

EARLY the next morning Larry was astonished to see Mary Andress approaching the bunk house. She walked with a slight limp. The injured foot was encased in an old boot which was much larger than the one which had been removed by Dolan.

"I'm going to ride to the south rim," she told Larry. "I want you to go with me, and you can have a dozen of the men go along to bury Jerry."

An hour later they started, the other men riding ahead; some of them with shovels strapped to the cantles of their saddles; Larry Allan and Mary trailing them.

Mary and Larry did not travel as fast as the others. The girl, Larry observed, was unusually quiet and he furtively studied her face. She seemed to be serious, almost solemn, and he knew that her thoughts were not on the trail. Nor were his. He was thinking of El Tigre. For nearly an hour no word passed between them. Then Larry spoke.

"What were you doin' on the south rim yesterday?"

"I like it. Dave Dolan liked to look at the southern country from there," she answered. "He used to say that from there he could get an idea about the size of the world. He brought me here many times, as you know. He'd get off his horse up there by a parapet wall and sit on a rock and gaze down into that country for hours without speaking a word.

"Once I asked him what he was thinking about. He wasn't thinking of the country at all. He said he was thinking of his brother, Warren Dolan, and of the girl, Anne Driscoll Dolan, who had become Warren Dolan's wife. He knew they had a son named Michael. He would go to the Rim to dream about them, visualizing them as they made the journey overland from Kansas to Wyoming. He loved them. He was always preparing to go to Wyoming to see them, but he kept postponing the trip until it was too late. You know what he made me promise."

"Sure, I heard him. You were to stay here and run the ranch until Michael Dolan came to claim it. You were to tell Michael Dolan that under no circumstances was he to dispose of the Square D property until the Vanio Talis gang had been wiped out. Dave Dolan hated Talis.

"You hadn't ought to come here alone, ma'am," continued Larry. "Vanio Talis and his men are always hanging around somewhere, and you might run into them."

"I ran into them yesterday, Larry. It was after Jerry had fallen. I think I must have been unconscious from the shock of landing in that tree, for there was a time when everything was blank to me. When I came to I heard voices, and I could see Vanio Talis and some of his men on a little level above the slope from which Jerry had fallen. Talis had killed Jose Sasvata. Sasvata had objected to his wife visiting El Tigre. It seems that Talis had sent her after El Tigre to order him to kill Michael Dolan when and if Michael Dolan appeared. Evidently Sasvata suspected that his wife was in love with El Tigre. I heard Talis say that, anyway."

"Well, El Tigre is a heart breaker."

The girl looked quickly at Larry. Her gaze was level.

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"How do you know that?"

"Once I met El Tigre. It was in the San Simon valley. I've heard it was the women who finally made it too hot for him to hang around there any more."

"Do you believe that, Larry?"

"I don't know, ma'am. El Tigre has a way with women."

"He's a gentleman, Larry."

"To you, I reckon. He couldn't be anything else. But, ma'am, do you judge him by the way he treated one woman?"

"I don't judge him at all."

Yet she had judged him. She had pronounced judgment. She had told Larry that El Tigre was a gentleman. She did not blame women for liking him, for falling in love with him, for she had felt the stirring of some emotion over her meeting with him and she was almost certain that if she had not overheard him planning to join the Talis band she might have become at least friendly with him. As it was she found she was jealous of Dolores Sasvata. That jealousy annoyed her.

When they reached the spot where Jerry had fallen they found the Square D men already digging a grave for the horse. They did not linger long, but rode to the level above and sat on their horses looking at the mound of earth that covered Jose Sasvata. They soon wheeled their horses and sat gazing into the lower country to the north and west. Far out and down they saw a rider on the narrow trail that undulated through the lower hills.

"There's El Tigre," said Larry. "That black horse is a wonder. What does he call him?"

"El Rey."

"The King, eh? Arabian stock, I expaict. Wonder what El Tigre is hangin' around there for?"

"He's going to Diablo," said Mary. "Larry," she added determinedly, "I've got to tell you. Yesterday while I was lodged in the tree I overheard Talis and El Tigre talking. Talis knew that El Tigre had come into this country. He had spies watching El Tigre's movements. He knew El Tigre was coming, but he did not know why. He could get no information from El Tigre, but finally El Tigre agreed to join his band. He is going to meet Talis in Diablo to-morrow night."

"Why didn't you tell me this yesterday, when El Tigre was at the Square D?" asked Larry.

"I know what you are thinking, Larry, but I didn't want it to happen. El Tigre had done me a service. He was my guest and under my protection."

Larry nodded.

"I expaict that's right, ma'am." His eyes clouded. "El Tigre coming here ain't makin' it any easier for us," he added.

Mary Andress's gaze was reflective.

"Larry," she said, "why should Talis send the Sasvata woman to El Tigre with an order to kill Michael Dolan should he find him? Does Talis suspect that Michael Dolan has come or is coming soon?"

"I don't know, ma'am."

Larry Allan's gaze grew speculative.

"H'm," he said. "H'm."

Mary added: "It's strange that Talis should issue that kind of an order. It seems that if Michael Dolan intended to come here we'd know of it before Talis."

"Seems that way. I expaict Talis is tryin' to be forehanded. You ain't heard anything about Michael Dolan, have you?"

"Not since I talked with Brinsmade

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a month ago. At that time Brinsmade said that he had not been able to find any trace of him."

Larry said quietly: "Dave Dolan gave you a big job. But he paid you well for it. That hundred thousand he put in the bank in your name over at Phoenix won't make your future any too hard."

"Dave Dolan was a wonderful man," declared Mary. "After father and mother and my brother died he treated me as he would have treated a daughter. He liked father. Father had done something for him which he appreciated, and he tried to make it up to me. And I shan't fail him, Larry. I shall stay here and take care of this place, and keep the Talis gang from stealing it. And when Michael Dolan comes — if he does come — I shall stay on to see that he does exactly what Dave Dolan wished he would do."

"Sure. Michael Dolan will have to step soft," grinned Larry.

"He must be a man, Larry."

"Sure."

"I hope he is a brave man," she added.

"And good lookin'?"

She gave him a keen, searching glance. Then she laughed.

"No," she said soberly. "Good looking men are seldom steady, Larry. I should prefer him to be merely a manly man."

"Sure. A manly man makes a good husband, they tell me."

"Larry," she said severely, "you know I'm not looking for a husband."

"You've told me that before, ma'am. If I'd thought you were lookin' for a husband I would have offered myself. Only I'm married."

"It's too bad you couldn't live with her, Larry."

"I done the best I could, ma'am. But she was one of those women who like good lookers. And she found plenty of them."

"Do you know where she is?"

"No, ma'am. An' she don't know where I am. So that makes us even."

Mary's gaze was level. Her thoughts were serious again.

"Larry," she said, "how do you suppose Talis learned that Dave Dolan had left his property to Michael Dolan?"

"There wasn't any secret about that. I've heard Dave Dolan tellin' the boys about Michael. Things like that get around. Anyway, if Talis has issued an order to his men to kill Michael Dolan he must know that Michael is comin'. As you say, ma'am, it would be odd if we didn't hear of it as soon as Talis."

Mary was silent again. She sat in the saddle, tapping the horse's foreleg with the booted toe of the uninjured foot. Somehow, Larry gained the impression that she was impatient.

"I don't like Señora Sasvata," she said, positively.

"Sure not."

"She's bold."

"She is, ma'am."

"Do you think she is good looking, Larry?"

"She ain't the kind I'd pick out."

There was no more conversation between them. They saw that Jerry was buried, and that the men were idly standing beside their horses, waiting. Mary and Larry rode down to join them. The saddle and bridle were found and the cavalcade rode down the slope, homeward.

Larry rode behind Mary. His brows were thoughtfully wrinkled, and there was a gleam in his eyes, a gleam of knowledge and wonder and amuse-

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ment. The knowledge he would keep to himself. The wonder had been aroused by the possession of knowledge. The amusement had been aroused by Mary's inquiries about Señora Sasvata.

"If El Tigre is an enemy of the Dolans you'd think she wouldn't care how many women were runnin' after him," was his thought. "But women"—he thoughtfully watched Mary—"are sure hard to understand."

CHAPTER XV.

"HE'S YELLOW!"

MICHAEL DOLAN'S explorations took him only a few miles north and south of the trail Talis had pointed out to him. From various eminences he had been able to view the land in all directions. It was a mighty domain, and there were times when he sat in the saddle on El Rey considering its magnitude. This was the fourth or fifth day he had spent on the Dolan land, and it seemed to him that there was no end to it.

He saw great uplands that receded to the horizon; mountain ranges so far away that they seemed like cloud banks; he gazed into green valleys that spread widely to meet distant plains; his gaze followed hills and ridges that undulated away in interminable serried phalanxes. All around him were gorges, cañons, walls of granite. Through various passes rose solemn towers and spires, and mesas with formidable, frowning walls. Forests, green levels, and flats; alkali stretches; a stream of water here and there. All of it spreading and expanding, mile upon mile in a silent, slumberous, desolate atmosphere.

About mid-afternoon on the day of his appointment with Talis he rode into Diablo. The "Town," as he had heard it called, was a collection of small adobe buildings situated on a level at the bottom of a valley surrounded by low hills and the walls of ragged cliffs that formed the edge of a great mesa that ran south to intersect the southern rim of the level valley. A small stream of water ran along the base of the mesa wall, coming from the eastern lowlands and flowing westward into a gorge. There was also a wagon trail extending westward along the bank of the stream. That trail, he assumed, connected Diablo with another town.

Dolan's first glimpse of Diablo came as he circled the base of a hill and began to descend a long slope that led down into the valley. He had arrived before the time appointed because his meager stock of food had been exhausted and thoughts of it were troubling him. So he rode into Diablo and halted El Rey at a hitching rack in front of the town's only restaurant.

Two tables, a greasy counter upon which, at the front, were several boxes of cigars and behind which stood a fat, untidy looking man with a florid face and big black mustache, constituted the fixtures of the place. Behind the counter was a gasoline stove with various pots and pans strewn over it.

Dolan seated himself upon a stool at the counter, ordered food and watched the fat man prepare it.

Dolan observed that his arrival in Diablo had aroused interest. Outside were several men who must have emerged from the town's buildings, for when Dolan had ridden in no one had been visible. The men were lounging around the hitching rack and they were obviously interested in El Rey. Among the men were two Mexicans.

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The others were obviously American. They were riders of various ages, and all of them were dirty, with unkempt hair and hard, wild eyes. Outlaws, Dolan decided, perhaps members of the Talis gang.

Riding into Diablo, Dolan had not seen the corral that spanned the stream of water. Now, seated at the counter, he could see the inclosure and he observed that it contained probably a score of horses. Most of them were tall and rangy. Good horses. The wild and desperate men of the ranges always provided themselves with the best.

OTHER men were joining the group in front of the restaurant. By the time Dolan had finished eating there were a dozen riders grouped at the hitching rack. Among them was one who seemed to dominate. He was a young man, short and slender. His movements were jerky, abrupt, swift, as if excessive nervous energy tugged at him. He was neater than any of the others, and cleaner. He wore a gray woolen shirt that seemed to have been washed and pressed; his leather chaps were clean and a well fitting cartridg belt encircled his slim waist.

Two heavy six-shooters were suspended from the belt, with the bottoms of the holsters attached to the chaps with rawhide thongs. The butts of the guns were tilted outward as if to facilitate their removal. Around this young man's neck was a clean red neckerchief. On his head was a practically new, wide brimmed Stetson, gray, matching the shirt. The hat was on the back of his head, at a rakish angle, disclosing a mop of bright, flaming red hair. His face was freckled, his nose short and tilted pugnaciously, his mouth was big, expressive. His upper teeth were long, white and prominent. He was standing at the end of the hitching rack, apart from the others, who were all watching him and listening. There was deference in their attitude toward him.

"You got a fine hoss there, stranger," said the fat man behind the counter, grinning widely. "Kid Eagan's got his eye on him."

"Which is Kid Eagan?" Dolan turned his head and gazed out of the window.

"He's that youngish looking man standing at the end of the hitching rack. Look's young but he ain't. Slick with his guns. Got a bad temper."

Kid Eagan was one of the men mentioned by Señora Vergez. She had described him as "hard-eyed."

Dolan finished eating, paid his bill and walked to the doorway, where he lounged, leaning against one of the door jambs. Out by the hitching rack Kid Eagan was standing, his arms folded across his chest, one hand supporting his chin as with the demeanor of a judge of horse flesh he appraised El Rey.

"Slick lookin' hoss," he said, while the others listened. "Good lines. Looks like he's got plenty sand. Gelding. Fast. Kentucky horse, I reckon. Notice that head and them thin nostrils. And his eyes. There's spirit there. Thoroughbred."

"How would you trade, Kid?" asked one of the men in the group.

"I wouldn't trade. This hoss is a good looker, and I reckon he has got bottom enough. But old Mustard is good enough for me. I've rode him seventy miles at a stretch and he tried to kick my hat off when we got through. The best lookin' hosses ain't always the best hosses," he sneered.

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"If this hoss's rider looks anything like the hoss I wouldn't go for to bet on him."

A man in the group laughed with suppressed mirth. Another chuckled. The rider standing nearest Kid Eagan slowly closed an eye at him and jerked a warning thumb toward the doorway of the restaurant, where Dolan stood.

The Kid's face flushed darkly. He had not seen Dolan. Now, realizing that his deprecating speech had been overheard, he stiffened and surveyed Dolan with cold, insolent eyes.

Dolan knew that this man was dangerous. He was a product of the lawless element that infested the West in sections where the law was remote or ineffective. Men of his type flourished and grew reckless and powerful because they did not hesitate to kill upon the slightest provocation. Kid Eagan, Dolan perceived at a glance, had a violent temper. Heredity or environment had here produced a character which was ruthless and wanton. Men like Kid Eagan were killers because they were physical and moral cowards. He was aware that even now Kid Eagan's wanton impulses were rampant.

He stood, facing Dolan, balancing himself on his toes as his gaze contemptuously roved over Dolan from head to foot.

"SO! You heard what I was sayin', did you?" he said. "Well, what are you goin' to do about it?"

"Nothing. If you don't like my horse that's your business. If you don't like me that's your business, too. I won't be making any special attempt to influence you one way or another," answered Dolan. He stepped down from the doorway, smoothly and deliberately, and stood near the hitching rack to light a cigar which he had purchased in the restaurant. He unconcernedly stepped to El Rey's head, calmly stroked the animal's muzzle and spoke to the man next to him, asking him if there was a place where he could secure feed for the horse.

The man directed him to a building east of the other buildings, separated from them.

"*Si, señor,*" answered the man. "That is Vanio Talis's stable. Miguel Lazus is there. He take care of your horse."

Ignoring the staring insolence of Kid Eagan and the furtive smiles of the other men, Dolan unhitched El Rey, swung into the saddle and rode down the trail to the building which had been pointed out to him. There he turned El Rey over to a Mexican stable man. Then, after lounging in front of the stable for a time he strode to the corral fence that spanned the river and leaning upon the top rail idly watched the horses in the inclosure.

Dolan had no inclination or desire to talk with any of these men or to make any attempt at social intercourse, and so he continued to lounge at the corral fence, anticipating that soon Vanio Talis would arrive and keep his appointment. However, time went slowly.

Dolan strode slowly down the trail and entered one of the saloons. Half a dozen men were lounging about in the room as Dolan sought the bar. He drank, set his empty glass down and stood silent as a voice, seeming to come from a very little distance behind him, said:

"Town's bein' cluttered up by strangers with swell-head."

Kid Eagan!

It was strange how Eagan contrived to inject the venom of hatred into his

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words. Behind him Dolan could feel the breathless silence. He knew that Kid Eagan meant to force trouble. He stood motionless. He smiled faintly at the bartender who was facing him. The bartender's face was expressionless, stony, pale.

As Dolan watched him, the bartender began to edge his way along the bar toward the front. He sought to do this in an unconcerned and casual manner, but the startled, apprehensive light in his eyes betrayed the inner panic that gripped him.

Still Dolan did not move and again came Kid Eagan's voice. This time it was writhing with contempt.

"I told you I wouldn't bet on him. He's yellow!"

CHAPTER XVI.

THE TEST.

THE saloon was nameless. There had been no sign on the front doorway except the one word "Saloon" painted crookedly upon the lintel. The room was large and floorless. The earth had been leveled. It was adobe and stone. Against the eastern wall where three card tables with men sitting around them. They had been merely sitting there when Dolan had entered and in the half-light of the place he had been unable to see their faces clearly. It was now his opinion that Kid Eagan had been among them. It made little difference where Kid Eagan had been.

He was now here, behind Dolan, so close that Dolan could hear his breathing. No doubt the gunman had been nurturing his passion until it had driven him to a wild yearning for action. A favorite trick of the cowardly Western gun fighter was to appear suddenly behind an unsuspecting victim, speak to him and shoot him down as he turned. Ordinarily the gunman's victim, realizing his predicament, would turn slowly, hesitatingly, to stare helplessly with horror, into the eyes of his murderer. It was from the victim's manner that the killer received the vicarious thrill he sought—that of witnessing his agony as he fell.

Kid Eagan's hands, curved like claws, were hovering above the butts of his guns. His feet were spread slightly. He was crouching. His head had come forward. It was poised like a rattlesnake in the act of striking. He was awaiting Dolan's turning movement, expecting it to be slow. The movement came so quickly that it brought a gasp of amazement from Eagan. He saw Dolan's big shoulders and chest looming over him and his curved fingers went down to the gun butts; gripped them. He was a fraction of a second too late.

Dolan's hands struck Eagan's wrists; the fingers, large and sinewy, seemed to crush flesh and bone. Dolan heaved mightily. There was a screech of agony from Eagan's suddenly whitened lips; his arms shot upward above his head, his paralyzed fingers still grasping the butts of the guns, Dolan's iron fingers still gripping his wrists. Holding Eagan thus Dolan brought the gunfighter's hands together with furious force, crushing the fingers that held the guns. Once, twice, three times the gun butts and fingers crashed, the steel of the weapons thudding against the crushed fingers until they relaxed their grip and the weapons clattered to the floor.

Then calmly, coldly, deliberately, Dolan forced Eagan's arms down in front of him until one of his big pow-

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erful hands encircled both of Eagan's wrists, holding them there as if they were lashed together into one unit. Holding Eagan's hands with his left, Dolan brought his right fist up against the gunman's jaw with crashing force. Eagan's head snapped backward, then forward limply.

Dolan permitted him to fall to the floor. Now he stood over the unconscious Eagan. His own gun was out and he faced the remainder of the outlaw group. The other men had not moved. They appeared to be stunned and bewildered over the volcanic movements of the big stranger and dismayed over the devastating attack upon the gunfighter.

"Has Kid Eagan any friends here?" said Dolan.

Apparently Eagan had no friends with sufficient courage or decision to interfere, for all the men were silent, staring at Dolan.

OTHER spectators had appeared. In the front door of the saloon, surrounded by the men who had been with him at the burial of Jose Sasvata, was Vanio Talis. The men's faces expressed amazement and curiosity, but Talis's eyes were flashing with interest and knowledge. His gaze shifted from the prostrate form of Eagan to the men seated at the tables, to the ashen-faced bartender, and last to Dolan. He spoke sharply to the men who had appeared at the door with him and they entered behind him, to stand just inside the door as Talis himself stepped forward, his eyes gleaming.

He grinned mirthlessly at Dolan.

"So!" he exclaimed. "It has happened! I was afraid it would, if Kid Eagan chanced to be here when you came, El Tigre."

The men who had been sitting at the tables were now on their feet, staring at Dolan. Talis interpreted the stares.

"Yes, fools!" he said coldly. "This man is El Tigre. He is one of us. It is my fault, perhaps, but if did not recognize El Tigre you at least might have recognized his horse, El Rey. Have you not heard of El Rey? Have you ever seen a horse like that?" His white teeth gleamed as he looked down at Kid Eagan, who was stirring.

They all stared in silence at Kid Eagan until finally he sat up, swaying dizzily, his mouth open to disclose his large teeth, his bewildered gaze seeking the men out one by one until he saw Talis.

"So, you tried to work your guns on El Tigre?"

Kid Eagan started. He was entirely conscious now, and he stared at Dolan.

"El Tigre!" he exclaimed.

"El Tigre, Kid," said Talis. "You didn't recognize the black horse. The whole country has heard about El Rey and El Tigre. Yes, everybody. Everybody, it seems, but Kid Eagan. Kid Eagan plays with fire, and gets burned."

Talis's eyes blazed.

"You are a fool, Eagan. You yield to temper when you should use your brains. This time you were lucky."

It was apparent that Eagan also took this view of the incident, for he grinned ruefully, picked up his guns, restored them to their holsters, felt of his jaw where Dolan's fist had landed, shook his head and stood, looking at Dolan.

"Correct," he said. "I sure made a mistake. Sure, I've heard about you. I've wanted to meet you, and I reckon I did. No hard feelings?"

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"No," answered Dolan.

The room was now filled with Talis's riders. Cold, cynical, hard-eyed men; wild and primitive; thieves, murderers, killers all, it was strange to see how they paid homage to one whose reputation was greater than their own. He was to them a magnetic figure to whose name was attached legends fearsome and bold.

El Tigre was a leader in the wild, reckless life of the border; a mighty man they had never seen until now, and they crowded close to him, their faces curious, their respect and admiration deepening as they saw that he was, indeed, a heroic figure. He had demonstrated his invulnerability. He had given them proof of the qualities that had made him famous. He had humbled Kid Eagan. The devastating swiftness and fury of his attack had awed them.

The other men fawned. Talis beamed. El Tigre, he foresaw, would be a valuable member of the band. Secretly he envied the man and jealousy stirred him deeply. Perhaps there would come a time when he would be as great as this wonderful El Tigre. He would use El Tigre until he had no longer any use for him and then perhaps an ambuscade, a well placed shot, would remove him. But he now had work for El Tigre and so he was gracious and flattering in his attentions.

SO Talis could afford to smile when late that night he drew Dolan into an adobe shack at the edge of town. The shack, Talis said, was El Tigre's as long as he remained in town. There was a good bunk in which to sleep. Presently Talis would go to his own bunk in another shack, but before he went there were certain things he wanted to talk about. For example, there was the division of the spoils when the Dolan property was at last acquired. Talis had lighted a candle and had placed it on a small table in the room. The men faced each other across the table, sitting on chairs that Talis had brought.

Dolan smiled.

"It isn't important," he answered. "A hunted man can make no terms."

"Good." Talis betrayed his pleasure with a broad smile. "Then I can afford to be generous. Half, after the men are paid." He could afford to be generous because at that instant he was again thinking of the ambuscade and the shot.

"Now, my friend," he went on softly, "I have been told about some of the things that happened since I met you on the Rim."

Dolan looked straight at him.

"You had one of your men follow me, I expect?"

"El Tigre is watchful. And El Tigre is interested in Mary Andress, eh?"

"She is a brave girl."

"And El Tigre is very gallant to the ladies. And considerate. Is that always the case, El Tigre?"

Dolan sat very still. But Talis, watching him intently, observed that his lips curved in a derisive smile.

Talis laughed.

"There is no fear that El Tigre will be won by the seductions of a woman," he said. "Love has never been serious game with El Tigre, I understand. So there is no danger of our plans going wrong on that score."

"No. She hates me."

"She hates you because she is afraid she will surrender to you, El Tigre. Do not be alarmed. In the end Mary Andress will fall into your arms."

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Again Dolan was silent.

"It does not matter whether you make a fool of her or not, El Tigre. That is your business. You will have the opportunity to be near her. You will have no difficulty in gaining her confidence. You took her home safely. She thinks you are a gentleman in spite of the fact that she knows you to be an outlaw. She saw you beat Latimor with your fists because he had abused the Vergez girl. In Mary Andress's eyes you are a defender of virtue and an agent of retribution. Yes, El Tigre, you will make a conquest."

HE looked at Dolan, smiling.

"Do you know what happened at the Square D after you left?"

"No."

"Pedro Vergez knifed Latimor. Killed him. Now the point is this. Latimor was *segundo* for the Square D, under Larry Allan. Latimor was working for the Square D, but he kept me supplied with all the information I wanted about the movements of the Square D stock and the activities of Mary Andress and her viper cowboys.

"El Tigre, the Square D riders are terrible fighters. They are gunmen that Dave Dolan recruited from all over the country. Without being informed of what they are doing we are almost powerless. I ask you to go back to the Square D and take Latimor's job. That will be easy. You will know what to say. If you tell Mary Andress that you have reformed she will believe you. The rest will be easy. You will give us the information we need and you will make your conquest."

If Vanio Talis had possessed the power to penetrate the expressionless mask of Dolan's face to read the contempt and rage that seethed in the man's brain he would not have sat there so complacently. Once Dolan's thoughts went to the gun at his hip and once his muscles quivered on the verge of violent action. Yet he controlled himself, knowing that Talis's death at his hands at this instant would not prevent the carrying out of Talis's plans by his men.

By adopting Talis's suggestion and continuing to impersonate El Tigre it would be possible for him to roam the country unmolested by Talis's outlaws, to learn the location of his various meeting places, to comprehend the extent of his plans and his methods of operation and to acquaint himself with the identity of every man in the outlaw organization. Then, having laid his plans, he would with the help of the Square D riders be able to destroy all of them.

"So Latimor was a Talisman," he said. "The Square D riders did not suspect. Mary Andress trusted him. And all the time he was betraying her. That was clever, Talis."

"My cleverness is traditional, El Tigre. Always I am planning and plotting. Like a general I move my men here and there to strategic positions. That is why some day I shall own the Dolan property. And that is why some day I shall sell Mary Andress into slavery in Mexico."

Once again death hovered at Talis's shoulder, for the muscles of Dolan's right hand twitched, and the rage in him grew terrible. But he smiled mirthlessly into Talis's eyes and his heart was full of guile and mockery as he gazed at the table top.

"Vanio Talis is a great man," he said. He hesitated and then continued: "But you are asking me to work in the dark. I do not know the

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country. I do not know where I might find you if I should look for you. I do not know where I could find your men. Certainly they don't always stay in Diablo."

"It is true," conceded Talis. "You know little of the country. As you say it is necessary for you to become acquainted with it. We are in no hurry. Michael Dolan, the heir, may not come this month or next. But he is coming. I have news from Albuquerque. *Por Dios!* How I hate Dave Dolan! And how I shall hate his nephew Michael Dolan."

"Poor Michael," smiled Dolan.

"Then it is settled," declared Talis. "To-morrow I shall take you to Dolan's Wells, over the divide. It is another town. It was founded by Dave Dolan. There are water holes. Once Dave Dolan used it as a trail camp. He built corrals there. Years ago it was the nearest point to a railroad. Now the Dolan herds are driven north to the new railroad."

Talis yawned, stretched his arms above his head, stood up and smiled at Dolan.

"Sleep well, El Tigre; and pleasant dreams," he said.

He went out, closing the door behind him.

Dolan's dreams were pleasant. He dreamed of Mary Andress.

CHAPTER XVII.

A NEW JOB.

ON a morning about two weeks later Michael Dolan rode El Rey eastward through the valley which formed part of the land that immediately surrounded the Square D ranch house. When at last he came within sight of the Square D ranch house he halted El Rey and sat loosely in the saddle meditating. He wasn't exactly pleased over the situation. He was reluctant to deceive Mary Andress any more than he had already deceived her.

He was certain that it would be difficult for him to get a job with the Square D. Yet he meant to try.

He rode up to the edge of the wide veranda of the ranch house, slid from the saddle, threw the reins over El Rey's head, mounted the veranda and walked to an open doorway, where he stood, to find Mary Andress confronting him from the other side of the threshold.

She was wearing a gingham dress with alternating stripes of white and pink. There was a decided flounce to the skirt, which was long. The sleeves were short, disclosing sun-browned arms, and the bodice was low at the neck with a fluffy collar. Her hair was arrayed in sinuous coils and loops that caught the subdued light that filtered through the doorway, creating a golden sheen that glowed and shimmered.

She had not been surprised to see him. Her gaze was straight and calm. He did not know that she had seen him from a window, and that there had been a period of nervous fluttering in front of the mirror in her room, with the hair and the dress.

It was Michael Dolan who was outwardly most affected as they stood there looking at each other. For Michael Dolan's color was deeper than the bronzed skin of his face.

Yet though his color was high his eyes were keen, and under Mary's exterior calmness he perceived excitement. The signs were few but unmistakable, tell-tale. Her rapid breathing, the soft glow in her eyes,

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betraying pleasure; the atmosphere of welcome that seemed to envelop her.

Michael Dolan took off his broad brimmed hat, held it in his hands and glanced down at it. He twirled it as if estimating its weight and size. He did not dare to meet Mary's gaze for fear she might see the guile and ecstasy in his eyes. No longer was it necessary for him to consider acting the awkward rôle of the job seeker. He was glad of that. To bluntly ask for a job would make her suspicious of him.

Mary may have felt that his continued examination of the hat was caused from embarrassment, for she said gently, encouragingly:

"So you came back?"

"Why, yes, ma'am."

Still he did not look at her but continued to twirl the hat. But his pulses were racing. The gentleness of her voice had stirred him strangely.

He wanted to stay at the Square D. He wanted her to ask him to stay. Somehow, knowing that the disclosing of his identity would make him master of the ranch, he was reluctant to assume the rôle of job seeker. He had a hope, now, that she would ask him to stay.

"YES, I'm back," he repeated. "You see, ma'am, I met Vanio Talis, as was agreed. You overheard Talis and myself making the appointment. What he offered me didn't suit me."

"Oh," she said. "I see. You didn't wish to join him in his war against the Square D?"

"That's right, ma'am. So I'm thinking of leaving this country."

He waited somewhat breathlessly for her reply.

There was a pause. Then she said:

"That's too bad."

Another pause. Then she added:

"Has it occurred to you that you might become an honest man again?"

"I've been thinking seriously of it, ma'am."

"Why," she exclaimed, "that is wonderful!"

Michael Dolan's color deepened. He certainly seemed the culprit as he stood there with bowed head, refusing to meet her gaze lest she should observe the guile in his eyes and misinterpret it.

"I expect it isn't so wonderful," he managed to say.

He now stood erect and looked at her. "I'm thinking of getting myself a job."

"Where?"

"Most anywhere."

"Oh," she said. She seemed severe now, and judicial.

"Do you mean that if you get a job—somewhere—you intend to stop this outlaw foolishness and become honest and dependable?"

"I'm aiming to be honest and dependable, ma'am." He dropped his gaze again, not daring to permit her to see his eyes, for at that instant they would have betrayed him.

"I'm glad of that," she said. "I think you will make a man of yourself—for somebody."

"I've been hoping I would, ma'am."

There was a silence again, and he thought it meant dismissal. So he took a backward step and bowed to her.

"Well, so long, ma'am," he said gently, politely. "I expect I'll be getting along."

She started perceptibly. She gazed downward at the floor of the veranda. Then she looked up quickly, her eyes big and luminous.

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"Why," she said, speaking as if the thought had just occurred to her. "Why—I—you see, I've been thinking that perhaps I might—that is, you might wish to ride for the Square D."

At this instant he realized the depth of his desire to have her ask him to stay. His muscles leaped, grew rigid, then relaxed.

"It certainly would save me a lot of trouble," he said. "I'm thanking you."

"Then it's arranged." She stepped through the doorway, then back again, realizing that she was betraying the excitement that had seized her.

"You find Larry Allan," she said. "Tell him that I've hired you."

"Thank you, ma'am." He bowed again and strode across the veranda, not replacing his hat until he reached the ground. He did not look back, although several times before he reached the mess and bunk houses he had to sternly fight off the impulse.

He found Larry Allan down at one of the gates of the horse corral. Allan stiffened when he saw him, but stood silent, regarding him with level gaze.

Dolan's face was now set in serious lines. He stopped within two or three paces of Larry, greeting him with a drawling "Howdy," adding, after an interval of silence:

"Mary Andress has hired me."

Larry Allan stared at him in amazement. Then he gasped:

"Well I'll be damned!"

CHAPTER XVIII.

"WHO ARE YOU?"

IN self protection, because he would not jeopardize Mary Andress's future, his own life or the success of his scheme to bring disaster to Vanio Talis, it was Michael Dolan's business to continue to deceive Mary and the Square D outfit by concealing his identity.

The Square D men received him with no demonstrations of any kind. They had been informed of his identity by Larry Allan, they had seen him administer a terrific thrashing to Big Bill Latimor. They respected his physical prowess, and it was not their business to criticize the judgment of their employer.

Michael Dolan needed no one to tell him that the Square D men were fighters. Their quietness, the cold serenity in their steady eyes, their manliness, was evidence enough. He knew they were suspicious of him, as they had a right to be, and he did not resent it, so he made no effort to force himself upon them. He obeyed orders that were given him by Larry Allan.

Day after day he rode with the men to various sections of the great Dolan range, spending many nights in the outlying camps.

He observed that while the other riders avoided him as much as possible, Larry Allan seemed to try to become friendly. Often, stretched out beside a campfire, or when they were riding together, he would catch Allan watching him as if studying him. But Allan was friendly. He seemed to have a quiet, persistent interest. He would ask questions about El Tigre's previous life and activities, about certain sections of the country in which El Tigre was reported to have operated. The San Simon Valley; the Big Hatchet Mountains; the Animas Range; Cook's Peak; and he would appear to only half listen to Dolan's replies. And then there were various questions about various people who lived in that vast country.

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Michael Dolan found it necessary to be somewhat evasive in his answers, for all he knew of the country that Allan spoke about was what he had learned from riding through it. He flattered himself, however, that his replies were satisfactory, even if evasive, for he felt that Allan could not expect direct answers from a man of El Tigre's type, who was hunted.

The great, drowsy, slumberous country was a wilderness empire. In its vastness it encompassed a dozen divides and watersheds. In its incomprehensible distances was mystery. In its silence was secrecy. Here and there in its unknown fastnesses were men who had designs upon the Dolan stock, wild riders who sought to keep themselves invisible, and whose attacks were sudden and devastating.

There were more than forty riders in the Square D outfit, and yet Larry Allan told Dolan there were too few of them to properly protect the Square D cattle.

"The trouble is," said Allan, "that we never know where the outlaws will strike next. For that reason we keep our herds confined to a certain area. Even that system doesn't work sometimes."

He and Michael Dolan had ridden south to the crest of a great upland, from where they could see the lower country, lying vast and silent below them.

"Look at it," directed Allan. "It's a world in itself. An army could be concealed in one of those gorges down there." He turned southward and pointed into a stretch of flaming desert. Sand. A dun dead expanse that shimmered and glowed in the brilliant sunlight. Far away, their bases swathed in purple shadows, their ragged walls of polychromatic stone gleaming above the purple mists as if they had been painted with a gigantic brush, rose a line of mesas.

Strange phantasmagoric patterns, swept and splashed with color, formed a background for the mesas. It was as if a cosmic veil was suspended on the horizon. Gleaming through the veil, blending with its ever-changing colors, could be seen the peaks of remote mountain ranges, their shapes nebulous and indistinct.

"That's where most of our stolen stock goes," said Allan. "That's Mexico. Where they run the cattle we don't know. Twice we've tried to trail stock through that country, only to lose them in the badlands. I think Talis has headquarters down there somewhere. He recruits his outlaws from there. Some day, if we can work it, we aim to get Talis and his band in one place, and when we do we'll wipe them out. Then this thing will stop."

Both men had dismounted. They were standing on the top of a grassy knoll and Allan was now silent, gazing out into the desert. He had moved backward one step, so that Dolan was standing in front of him as they both faced the desert. There was a silence. Michael Dolan became aware of the fact that the iron ring of Larry Allan's gun muzzle was pressing into his back just above the hips. He stood rigid for a moment and then slowly turned his head and looked back into Allan's eyes.

Both men were silent, each man's gaze probing the other.

Larry Allan spoke.

"Come clean," he said, coldly. "You're not El Tigre. I aim to find out who you are right now!"

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK.

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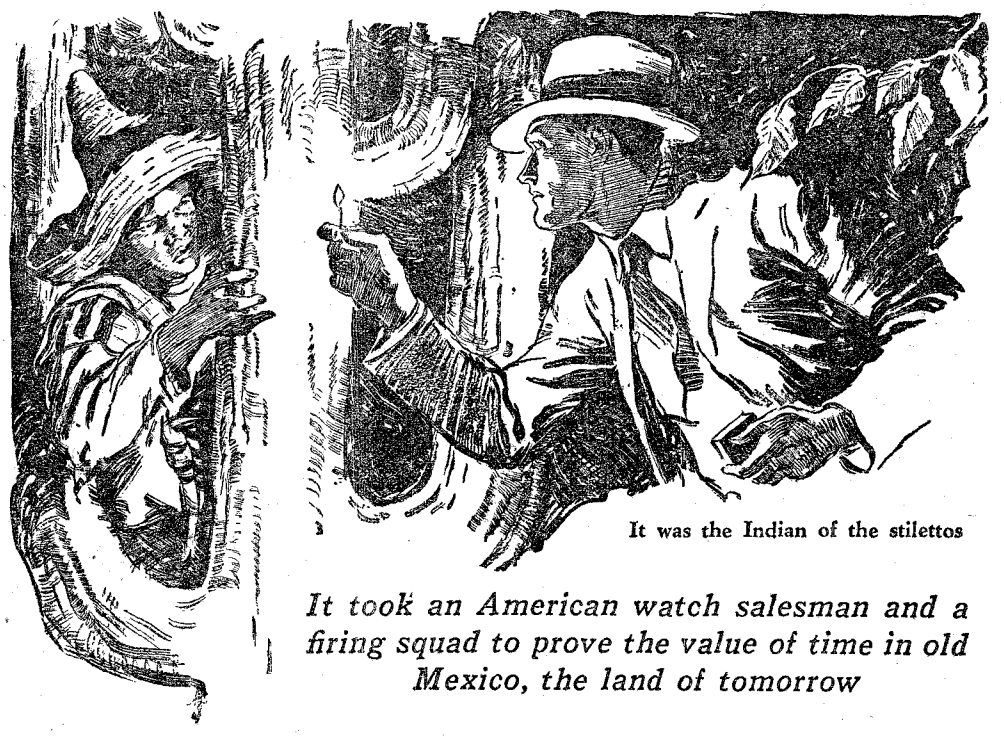
No More Mañanas

By COLE RICHARDS



It was the Indian of the stilettos

It took an American watch salesman and a firing squad to prove the value of time in old Mexico, the land of tomorrow

VILLA RICA, Mexico, is a town of legends. If you buy tequila from the bartender with the brushy mustache in the Glory of Mexico, or if you talk with the Mexican in the fringed serape whose rickety, flea-haunted cab holds up a spavined horse beside the plaza, or if you try to sell American made axes to the hardware man—any of them will tell you the legends. And they will tell you of the miracle which saved Benito Morales.

It was a miracle, without doubt, *señor*. A miracle of time. Even the Indians will admit it, and time is nothing to an Indian. Time, indeed was nothing to any Mexican in Villa Rica until Bernal Morales died by his cousin Benito's stiletto.

It was fiesta in Villa Rica. Indians in white cotton pants and dark red serapes breakfasted at plaza booths under the cypress and mango trees. They crowded through burros and babies and dogs and other Indians to buy a tortilla with cheese here and beans there, seasoned with chili, washed down with coffee or with pulque bought in the Delight of the Angels.

Mestizos, who are part Spanish, wore gray or plum colored sombreros and fine linen suits. They rolled brown paper cigarettes, ate of boiled corn on the cob and occupied green plaza benches until the gambling booths opened with cries of:

"*Venga, muchacho! Un centavo!*" Come on, boy! One cent a chance!

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Indian and mestizo alike spent a little money and a great deal of time. But what is time in Mexico? There is always *mañana*—to-morrow. Mexicans of bloody history, descendants of a highly developed civilization, are children still.

If time was nothing to them, it was everything to the tall American watch drummer who lounged, linen-suited, arms folded, before the Glory of Mexico. A lock of hair trailed from under his panama into the keen shaft of his eyes. His mouth quirked in a haunting smile, memento of a dissatisfied customer in New Mexico. Cool, good natured, Dillon spoke Spanish like a native, equaled the Mexicans in politeness and was patience itself in getting orders.

But this morning his languid manner covered rising irritability. He was hungry, he was deafened by the wild clangor of fiesta bells and bursting bombs. And, after two weeks of awaiting the pleasure of Benito Morales on a watch order, he knew that Benito had decided not to give him the order. Benito would not say so. He said, "*Mañana, señor,*" and promised to have breakfast with Dillon. He was already half an hour late, a Mexican custom.

Dillon bowed and exchanged greetings with strolling mestizos, and boiled inside. And the fiesta went merrily on. The church bell turned somersaults. Bombs split the crystal morning until they must have rocked Popocatepetl. Indians ate candy and bought knick-knacks like children.

SUDDENLY Dillon's wandering glance was fixed by the sight of two men running round the plaza fountain. One was a mestizo, resplendent in gray sombrero, red sash and tight trousers with red buttons twinkling from hip to ankle. The other was a barefoot Indian in dirty whites, with a serape over his shoulder.

Dillon could not tell which was the aggressor, until the Indian whirled. A twist of the arm wrapped the serape around it for a shield and his right hand went to the waist of his ragged pants of his knife. The weapon was gone.

He stood stupefied.

The mestizo had a knife in his hand With a gallant gesture he sheathed it, then rocked the unsuspecting Indian with a right to the eye. Stunned by his unheard of way of fighting, the Indian stood limp-handed and swayed under the shock of successive blows. The mestizo had no science, but plenty of force. The Indian was badly cut up before he came out of his stupor. He lunged at the mestizo, ran into a fist and fell.

As he lay under an hibiscus, with an arm over his head, he looked like any Indian who made the plaza his hotel. Numerous others were still asleep. Some one jerked the Indian's serape over his back. The Indian lay, apparently asleep, under the hibiscus—and on that circumstance hinged one man's death, Benito's life, and Dillon's order for watches.

A shrill whistle and the pound of a dozen feet coming at the double-quick heralded the policeman and a squad of soldiers. The mestizo disappeared behind the booths, emerged down the street and entered a patio gate. The lounging mestizos and Indians stuffing themselves at the booths told the policeman they saw nothing. The witness of a crime in Villa Rica is jailed seventy-two hours, incommunicado. Ordinarily, one does not mind it; what is time? But at fiesta, it is different.

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Brown faces looked blank. Braided heads and sombreroed heads wagged slowly. No, *Señor Sereno,* we saw nothing. No, *Señor Sereno* (policeman) there has been no noise except the bombs and the church bell. Policeman and soldiers returned to the calabozo.

Dillon awaited Benito in somewhat better humor. The fist fight was an unexpected interlude.

Unexpected, too, was Benito's sudden appearance.

From the patio gate the battling mestizo had entered, Benito came out bodily. Benito was a slender Mexican, of medium height, dressed in American serge, the trousers cut with the high waistband dear to the Mexican heart. Gold rings of turquoise and opal adorned his hands, and a neat black mustache set off his olive skin and white teeth.

Bodily he left the gate, to land on hands and knees in the thick dust. He got up, still holding a black lace mantilla. He spun round and a knife shone in his hand. His teeth gleamed and his lip curled under the little black mustache in scathing remarks. He changed position constantly like a fighting cock.

"The lady's husband came home," Dillon said to himself. "Say! What's this?"

Benito's opponent lounged in the gate, outshining the dawn with his red sash and trouser buttons. It was the mestizo of the fists. He was easy of movement; kicking out Benito had not even knocked his sombrero askew. The thing that made Dillon say "What's this?" was his resemblance to Benito. In build, narrow face and sensual mouth, they must be of a family.

For the time it took the church bell to somersault, neither moved. Plaza loungers stared like children at a play; the bell clangor made the fight seem like a pantomime. Suddenly Benito lunged. The mestizo smiled mockingly. With a matador's grace he sidestepped into the street. His hand swooped out as Benito lunged past. There was descending light.

The mestizo's foot stamped on the stiletto.

He kicked it inside, entered the patio, and slammed the gate. Benito tossed the mantilla to a beggar woman.

Dillon turned his back and read lottery lists. He did not want Benito to know he had seen his defeat. Dillon was first of all a watch salesman, and Benito could be one of his best customers. While he read the lottery list, the bell clangor stopped and bombs exploded at long intervals instead of continuously.

"AH, you await me, *señor,*" said Benito at his elbow. He had removed the dirt from his trousers and hands. His lips parted under his dapper mustache in a smile as smooth as his ring opal.

"I just arrived," Dillon lied. During breakfast, according to Mexican custom, neither mentioned the watches. When they came out of the café, Dillon saw the gorgeous mestizo escorting a creamy *señorita* from booth to booth.

"That chap resembles you," said the American.

"It is my cousin, Bernal Morales. That girl Maria," Benito added, virtuously, "is a bad one. Bernal does not always choose good company."

Dillon put on a poker face and hastily offered Benito candy from an Indian's display of pyramids. While Benito made his choice, a groggy Indian in the plaza explored his battered face. Benito's wrist was red where

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Bernal had struck it. With half his mind, Dillon wondered what else the fiesta would bring for Bernal; the other half wondered what he could do to make Benito order the watches Dillon wanted to sell.

They went to Benito's shop, across from the plaza. It was a cubbyhole, windowless. The morning sun streamed through the door and across the wooden counter. Blankets in brilliant colors draped the walls. Benito opened a wall case displaying stilettos, rings, bracelets and curios. When Dillon got his sample case from the little safe, Benito halted him with:

"*Mañana, señor.* Tomorrow I'll buy, if I buy. I must think about the watches. My trade is Indian. What is time to an Indian?"

"Time is nothing, but they like to hear the watches tick." Dillon always smiled, because of the old mouth wound.

He knew very well Benito had trade for cheap watches. Villa Rica, trade center for sugar estates, had a thousand inhabitants and several thousand peons worked the sugar. Indians like watches. It is pleasant to sit in the shade of a cypress or nopal and watch the merry second hand go round. The tick, tick is good to hear in a silent land. It is pleasant, too, to have something worth a few centavos in the pawn shop.

Dillon's fingers stole to his pocket. A gift for Benito lay there, to be given when he signed the watch order. Dillon thought of showing it to him and then decided not to, because a customer had come in.

"There's an Indian. Try a watch on him."

The customer was a barefooted Aztec in dirty white cottons, battered straw sombrero and serape black with age. His mouse-colored burro stood in the doorway. As the Indian turned to him, Dillon saw his face was blotched purple; an eye was swollen and his lip was laid open. It was the man Bernal had chased around the fountain.

The Aztec's roving eyes rested on a stiletto displayed on a wall blanket. A covetous gleam touched their depths. The stiletto blade was of fine steel, so sharp it turned Dillon icy in the knife region between the shoulder-blades.

The hilt of pearl carried a silver bar engraved "Benito Morales."

"Buy a watch?" Benito asked, in Spanish.

"No," the Aztec answered sullenly. "Knife. Mine lost itself."

Benito got out a board of stilettos, some with a light bone hilt, some with black hilts. "A lady lost it for you, *no es verdad, Indio?*" he sneered. "A lady named Maria. *Sí.* She is a bad one. Bad for mestizos, and doubly bad for Indians."

The Aztec hissed a curse and described the canine ancestry of all mestizos. Benito took it with a smile; he considered himself the superior of an Indian, and he accepted the curses as he would accept the snarls of a teased mongrel. Nor did he cease smiling when the Indian shifted from mestizos in general to Bernal Morales in particular; Benito did not love his gorgeous cousin overmuch, himself, that fiesta morning.

The Aztec's dark, thick hands went to the string around his pants, to make sure his knife was really gone. His eyes wandered to Benito's stiletto on the wall blanket. They came reluctantly back to the stiletto board, where the knives were cheap.

"Sometimes they break," he said.

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Dillon went cold in the knife region again.

BENITO walked down to Dillon, turning his back to let the Indian know how little it mattered whether he bought or not. He told how Bernal had beaten the Indian in the plaza.

"I saw it," said the American. "He's taking his time buying a new knife. What is there to choose? They're all alike. But he's been here ten minutes."

Benito shrugged. "What is time to an Indian? If he does not buy to-day, he will *mañana*. There is always to-morrow."

A lift of his chin signaled Dillon to open the sample case. Benito looked at the watches his back to the Indian. Dillon saw a shadow flit over the streak of sun in the door. He heard the burro trot away to the time of a stick beating his rump. He looked around. Benito came out of his dream to smile. "You see, *señor?* What is time to an Indian? If not to-day, *mañana.*"

Benito strolled to the stiletto board. His beringed hands grasped it. Then he stared, with bulging eyes, at something on the counter. He emitted a choked gurgle, and burst out the door, shouting and gesticulating.

Mexicans and Indians at the plaza booths turned to look. A soldier ran from the jail. A policeman came, tooting a whistle. Morales's story ran out in fiery spurts, like a fiesta rocket.

The Indian had not delayed his purchase until *mañana*. He had left a peso on the counter and had made his choice of the stilettos. From the wall blanket he had taken the fine steel blade with pearl hilt and silver bar engraved "Benito Morales."

The straggle of hair in the American's keen eyes moved with the understanding lift of his eyebrows. He threw the sample case into the safe and locked it. His lean shadow appeared on the doorsill; it followed him across the dusty street to the plaza. Dillon had an effortless, ground-eating stride, and he did not stop until he sank on a green bench with a newspaper in front of his face.

Dillon did not want to spend seventy-two hours in a flea-ridden jail because he witnessed a theft. Besides, the Aztec had left his peso, which made it less of a theft.

"They'll catch him and find the stiletto on him. He can't get far with that burro."

The policeman, a big man of flat, dark face, dressed in linens and puttees, with a huge .45 swaying on his big thigh, started after the Indian. The plaza loungers watched until he was out of sight, but they did not follow. Why make the effort when the parade of thief and soldiers would repass the plaza, anyway?

The day passed, and the Indian was not found. His burro did not hamper his escape. In a field not far from Benito's shop a number of burros grazed. Word came to the plaza that one of them belonged to the Indian. A soldier was left there to arrest him on his return.

THE policeman and soldiers returned to the plaza, but without the prisoner. The soldiers surrounded the plaza, and every Indian in it was subjected to scrutiny. Head after head tipped back to let the policeman look at the faces under the wide hat brims.

The policeman, heavy with years and dignity, had a microscopic eye. Seek-

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ing a face purpled by fists, he looked into dirty faces and faces sticky with candy, faces smeared by tamales, dampened with tequila and fiesta ardor, blackened by fireworks powder. Sullen faces, cruel faces, sad faces, frightened faces showed themselves when the heads tipped back and he looked under the straw sombreros.

It was hopeless to seek one battered Indian among three thousand. But the policeman kept on. All afternoon his linens and puttees appeared in the plaza, and at the pulque shops, and at the fight of the Christians and the Moors.

Plaza loungers began to talk again.

"Perhaps the Indian did not take the stiletto. Perhaps there is no such Indian."

"Then why should Benito say he took the knife?" The Indian who asked that liked things to be simple. Others nodded in agreement.

"Because," said the wiser one, "it is not easy to withdraw a knife that is driven in with force. Benito would like to kill Bernal, and blame some one. What better person than the Indian whom Bernal beat?"

Dilllon felt cold in the knife region. He threaded his way through Indians and women, children and dogs to the Glory of Mexico to get something to take away the chill.

Benito stood at the bar, drenched in gloom. "It is gone, *señor*," he said, dolefully. "If I had not been looking at the watches he would not have got my stiletto."

"I hope you won't refuse the order because of that. Suppose you mislaid the stiletto, and he did not take it?"

"But he left the peso! You saw him take it!"

"A peso was on the counter, but neither of us saw him take the knife."

"True," Benito sighed. "The watches cost me my stiletto. I am very sad. Let us have a drink, *señor*."

When they had drunk and choked and shivered the American looked at his wrist watch. "Six thirty."

"The time again! What does time matter?"

"It doesn't," Dillon smiled. The bartender with the brushy mustache, who had listened to the conversation, smiled back. The American went on, "There is always to-morrow. Always *mañana*. But I was checking with my appetite, which says it's dinner time."

Benito bowed in defeat. "It is half past six."

No earthquake shook the ground. No lightnings rent the sky and no volcanic fireworks shattered Mount Popo. The bartender wiped a glass, a buzzing fly sought a resting place on a yellow and crimson painting, a rickety phonograph screeched, "Yessir, She's My Baby," Dillon sucked a peppermint to cover the tequila taste. In short, life went on as usual.

Nothing happened to announce to an astounded Villa Rica that a miracle had been prepared for. And it, of all possible mircles in this land of *mañanas*, was a miracle of time.

Dillon walked home with Benito and promised to return later. He ate at a wayside *fonda* and strolled out into the country. Before he had gone far he saw the gorgeous Bernal strolling ahead of him, alone. The mestizo's red sash opposed the sunset and the last sunbeams played tunes up and down his decorative buttons.

Not to be accused of spying, Dillon lolled under a cypress tree and smoked. Bernal passed a tract of sugar cane and came to a group of three houses sunk in cypresses and oleanders. He knocked at a wall gate but it did not

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open. Bernal leaned against the wall and lit a cigarette. The twilight was so deep that, at the distance, Dillon could make out only his light gray sombrero and the red tip of his cigarette.

Dillon went back to town. On the way back he met but one person, who hid behind a twenty-foot cactus. Dillon stopped and deliberately struck a match. He looked into the battered face of the Indian of the stilettos.

"*Buenas noches, señor,*" the Indian murmured, as softly as a fountain plashing in the velvet night.

"*Buenas noches.*"

DILLON strolled on. Darkness had fallen when he came to town. The gambling booths and pulque shops were going full blast. Indians who had spent their money had rolled in their serapes and were asleep in the plaza. Far down the street the policeman's lantern shone. His shrill whistle informed the peaceful night that all was serene in Villa Rica.

"The stiletto Indian—" Dillon began, when he got to the lantern.

"Listen!" the policeman commanded.

The woman's scream, faint with distance, sounded at first like the high note of a laugh. It was repeated and repeated in rising cadence until it became a long drawn out shriek. Then a man's excited shouts rose and beat like the clangor of bells. The *sereno's* lantern bobbed in time to his heavy run. Dillon ran at his heels. A motley crowd streamed out of a pulque shop and deserted a gambling booth.

They passed the twenty-foot cactus and the big cypress and came to the three houses under the oleanders. The woman's scream had turned to sobbing. The man shouted, "This way."

The lantern light picked out a man face down beside a lava wall. Red buttons outlined his trousers. His gray sombrero was upside down in the dust. Just under his broadcloth bolero, where the red sash was wide, a thin crimson stream dripped off a knife hilt of pearl. For the gorgeous Bernal Morales there would be no more Marias, no more Indians to beat with his fist, no more *mañanas*.

"*Muerto?*" the policeman asked, knowing the answer. Bernal was obviously dead.

Officialdom gathered swiftly. There came a bald-headed magistrate with the cruel eyes of a savage and the marks of twenty years of military service. There came a squad of soldiers in nondescript khaki and shoes that clumped. There came a sharp featured doctor on a white horse.

Then came Mexicans and Indians who flattened themselves against the wall and crowded around Dillon, smothering him with odors of pulque and cheese, chili and unwashed bodies. The yellow lantern light touched dark serapes over shoulders, and brown faces, infinitely sad, betraying nothing of their love of gossip and excitement. They shuffled bare or sandaled feet and murmured among themselves, in childish awe of magistrate and soldiers.

"When the soldiers get the murderer, they will stand him against this very wall and shoot him." "Not this wall. The one behind the jail. And he is not shot for three days." "But he will be shot." "Yes, he will be shot."

Last of all came Benito Morales, to weep and wail as if he would not have planted the stiletto in his cousin's ribs if he had the chance. Tears rolled down his slender olive cheeks and glistened on his dapper black mustache.

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Now his hands went out in supplication as he talked, now they used a linen handkerchief, now they rested, limp with distress, on his sides.

He recognized his stilettto at once. "The Indian did it. Bernal beat him with his fists and the Indian took my knife."

The policeman lifted his lantern to let it shine in Benito's eyes. The light struck his own face, flat, broad, high of cheek bone. His expression was as flat and unyielding as a wall. The policeman had spent the day looking under straw sombreros for a battered Indian. He had been unyielding in his search. Now, standing over the dead Bernal with the lantern in Benito's face, he made one flat statement:

"There was no such Indian."

"*Por Dios,* you must believe me," Benito cried in genuine anguish. "Would I kill my own cousin?"

"*Quien sabe?* Who knows?" The policeman's tone was as flat as the wall at a condemned man's back.

THE soldiers thumped their rifle butts on the ground. The Mexicans drew away from Benito, obediently. Dillon felt sick, knowing that any trial Benito received from then on would be but empty formality. In Mexico, murderers receive short shrift. Legal punishment is one of the few things a Mexican does with despatch. In the back districts, many a murderer has stood with rifles in his face before his victim was buried. Such swift punishments had occurred in Villa Rica, where the magistrate was a military man, who combined an Indian's cruelty with a soldier's speed. There would be no battery of lawyers and no delays for Benito, who could be a heavy buyer of watches.

"Look here," Dillon burst out in Spanish. "Though I didn't see the Indian take the knife, I did see Bernal beat him. And I know the Indian was in Benito's shop. And to-night I met the Indian at the big cactus. He was following Bernal."

"Stop talking," the policeman interrupted. "You are under arrest as a witness."

"Arrest!" Dillon moaned, "That means three days in the brig."

"What is three days when one has so many to-morrows?" Benito asked dolefully. "For me, my friend, the three days will bring a wall and a firing squad. And after that, no more *mañanas.*"

Dillon saw two weeks' work and a good watch customer going up in gunsmoke. He was positive of Benito's innocence.

Dillon turned to the magistrate. "Won't you believe me that the Indian followed Bernal, and probably stole the stiletto?"

"Unless you witnessed the murder, you prove nothing, my friend," the magistrate explained. "The *sereno,*" he indicated the policeman, "says there was no such Indian. It appears Benito laid plans."

"If he were careful enough to lay plans, he'd hardly use a knife carrying his own name."

"*Quien sabe* what a murderer will do? We will not discuss this until after the seventy-two hours."

"Then nothing will save Benito?" Dillon asked.

"A miracle might." The magistrate's cruel eyes were emotionless. A life, more or less, meant nothing to him. "We will not talk, please. It is not the custom."

With a salesman's persistence, Dillon said, "Do miracles ever happen in Villa Rica?"

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The magistrate shrugged. "*Quien sabe?*"

Then the doctor grasped Bernal to turn him over. Dillon bent to help him. As they lifted the body, something slipped from the pocket and thumped on the ground. It was a watch, with the crystal broken, and the hands caught at half past six.

"There," Dillon exclaimed, "is the witness of the murder. The watch broke when Bernal fell on it. It stopped at the time he died, half past six. Benito could not have killed him, for at half past six, the bartender will tell you he was with me in the Glory of Mexico."

"You said you saw Bernal this evening," the policeman said.

"I saw him," Dillon answered glibly, "before half past six." Even if they checked on Bernal's movements with other witnesses, there was little danger that the alibi would be shattered, because Bernal was killed at no later than seven thirty. No one could check his movements to the hour, for no one in Villa Rica paid attention to the time. What is time?

The policeman did not offer to check up. His opinion on the alibi was as Mexican as Popo, as unchangeable as a stone image.

"*No es costumbre*—it is not the custom."

The soldiers formed around Benito. One prodded Dillon in the back with a rifle butt. Then the magistrate's cruel eyes narrowed. His head lowered and his mouth drew down at one side in the angry leer of a soldier whose subordinate has overstepped bounds.

"Is it the custom," he demanded harshly, "for me to have innocent men arrested? I believe the watch stopped when Bernal died. I can soon learn whether or not Benito was in the Glory of Mexico. That will be enough. Moreover, an Indian with battered face stands on the edge of the crowd there. Like all Indians, he must know what is going on before he tries to save himself. If you cannot catch him now, you are a very bad policeman."

There were astounded mutters and the crowd of Mexicans and Indians came to life. Not to run. No, indeed. Dillon's toes were trod on by sandaled feet. He was crowded by the heavy warmth of serapes and forced to inhale fumes of pulque and chili and cheap tobacco while the eager brown faces crowded around to see the watch.

"One look. *Por Dios, amigo,* let me see the watch which told the magistrate about the murder." "Look, Juan. Look, Diego. It is like a magician's mirror, in the things it tells." "Sssh! Say nothing of that! Padres and magistrates and Americans do not know there are magicians any more in Mexico. Look at the writing on the back of the watch. Beautiful! You heard what was said? Bernal had the kindness to fall so hard as to break his watch at the exact time he died. At that time, his cousin was in the Glory of Mexico."

"*Si,* the watch said so. Do not step on my bare toe, *amigo*. I, too, must see this watch that saw the murder and talked to the magistrate.

It is a miracle, *señor;* can you question it? Who would have thought time could amount to so much?

THAT ends the legend as told by the driver of the flea-haunted cab or the bartender in the Glory of Mexico, or the hardware man to whom you try to sell American axes. The finest thing about legends is that

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no one knows the whole truth of them. So it is only for Americans to know that the morning following the arrest of the Indian, Dillon entered Benito's shop and took his sample case out of the safe.

"I beg you, *señor,*" said Benito, "no watches to-day. There is always to-morrow. Besides, it is the truth, *señor,* I think I never want to see another watch."

"You came close to seeing no more *mañanas,* my friend. Time is nothing to an Indian, but it meant a great deal to you last night."

"True, true, *señor.*" Benito sighed, but his sigh was not for his narrow escape. "Was that not a beautiful watch my cousin had? I never saw it before?"

"Neither did Bernal," said Dillon.

Benito's mouth dropped open. "The crystal was smashed by his body!"

"The crystal was smashed by my thumb. The watch was engraved "B.M." Sure. I bought it for you, to give you when you filled out an order. The B. M. stood for Benito Morales but it served for Bernal, as well. It was easy, as I stood in the shadow, to set the watch and break the crystal, and then to drop it as I helped with the body."

"The watch saved me!"

"Yep. You were saved by the good old American alibi—time."

Dillon opened the sample case, set a watch at half past six and started it ticking. The tick, tick was pleasant, as pleasant as it would be to some Indian resting under a cypress from his work in the sugar cane. Yet the pleasant ticking was not the loudest sound in Benito's shop.

Louder yet was the scratch of a pen as Benito filled out an order.

THE END.

New Novels

"Railroad," by T. S. Stribling, who won this year's Pulitzer prize for the best American novel; "Alarm!" by Karl Detzer, greatest of fire-fighting writers; "The Lost Land of Atzlan," a fantastic by the ever-popular Fred MacIsaac; "The Diamond Specter," a baseball mystery by H. L. McNary, author of "The World's Series Murders."

Long Novelettes and Short Stories

By Hulbert Footner, Theodore Roscoe, George F. Worts, Albert Payson Terhune, Ralph R. Perry, Erle Stanley Gardner, H. Bedford-Jones. Richard Howells Watkins, and other stars.

Favorite Characters

Mme. Storey, Singapore Sammy, Bob Zane, Thibaut Corday, Fish and Horace, Bill and Jim, Bellow Bill Williams, Terry Kilroe.

All in July and August issues

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MEN of DARING
By Stookie Allen
A SKIPPER COURAGEOUS AND NAVIGATOR EXTRAORDINARY
CAPT. GILES C. STEDMAN
DAUNTLESS, COOL-HEADED AND RESOURCEFUL, CAPTAIN STEDMAN TAKES RANK WITH THE INTREPID AMERICAN MERCHANT SKIPPERS WHOSE DARING RESCUES HAVE BEEN MODERN EPICS OF THE SEA
JOIN THE NAVY
SEE THE WORLD
HE WAS BORN IN MASSACHUSETTS, CRADLE OF MANY ANOTHER BOLD SEA-FARER, IN 1897, AT WEST QUINCY. GRADUATING FROM HIGH SCHOOL WHEN BARELY 17, HE JOINED THE NAVY.
THE DECK-SCRUB-BING AND GUN-POLISHING STAGE OF HIS NAVAL TRAINING WAS BRIEF. HIS READY GRASP OF SEAMANSHIP SOON WON HIM AN ASSIGN-MENT TO THE HARVARD NAUTICAL SCHOOL. WHEN THE WORLD WAR CAME, HE SERVED AS A PETTY OFFICER ABOARD A TRANSPORT.

This feature appears in ARGOSY every week

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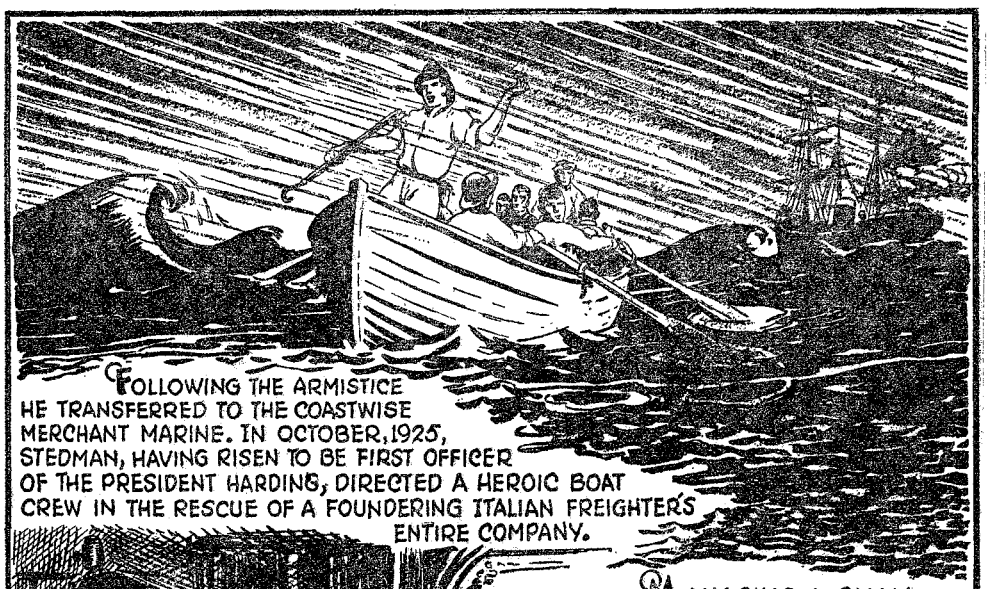
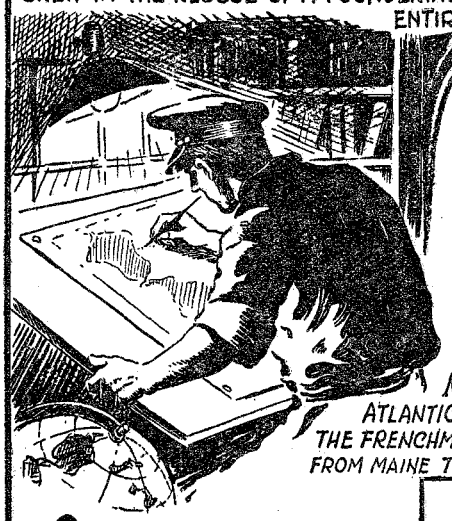


FOLLOWING THE ARMISTICE HE TRANSFERRED TO THE COASTWISE MERCHANT MARINE. IN OCTOBER, 1925, STEDMAN, HAVING RISEN TO BE FIRST OFFICER OF THE PRESIDENT HARDING, DIRECTED A HEROIC BOAT CREW IN THE RESCUE OF A FOUNDERING ITALIAN FREIGHTER'S ENTIRE COMPANY.



MANAGING A SMALL BOAT IN MOUNTAINOUS SEAS CALLED FOR DARING AND SKILL OF THE HIGHEST ORDER. FOR THIS FEAT STEDMAN RECEIVED THE TREASURY DEPARTMENT'S MEDAL OF HONOR AND AN ITALIAN GOVERNMENT DECORATION. HE WON PROMOTION TO NAVIGATOR, THEN CHIEF OFFICER OF THE LEVIATHAN. IN MARCH, 1931 HE BECAME MASTER OF THE AMERICAN MERCHANT. *MEANTIME HE PLOTTED COURSES FOR TRANS-ATLANTIC FLYERS, INCLUDING CLARENCE CHAMBERLIN AND THE FRENCHMEN WHO FLEW THE YELLOW BIRD FROM MAINE TO SPAIN IN 1929.*

CAPT. STEDMAN MADE AN AMAZING RESCUE OF THE FREIGHTER EXETER CITY'S CREW IN A RAGING ATLANTIC STORM LAST JANUARY. IT TOOK ALL HIS UNCANNY NAVIGATING SKILL EVEN TO LOCATE THE SINKING SHIP. IN EFFECTING THE RESCUE HE SHOT A LINE OVER TO THE WRECK, BLANKETED THE SEA WITH OIL, AND HAULED A LIFE BOAT BACK AND FORTH UNTIL EVERY MAN WAS SAFELY ABOARD THE AMERICAN MERCHANT. HE MODESTLY GAVE THE MEN UNDER HIM MOST OF THE CREDIT. HE IS NOW STAFF CAPTAIN OF THE LEVIATHAN. AS MODEST AS HE IS FEARLESS, HE LIVES UP TO THE TRADITIONS OF THE SEA.

MAYOR O'BRIEN OF NEW YORK, PINNING CITY'S MEDAL ON CAPT. STEDMAN.

Next Week: Duke of the Abruzzi, A Royal Adventurer

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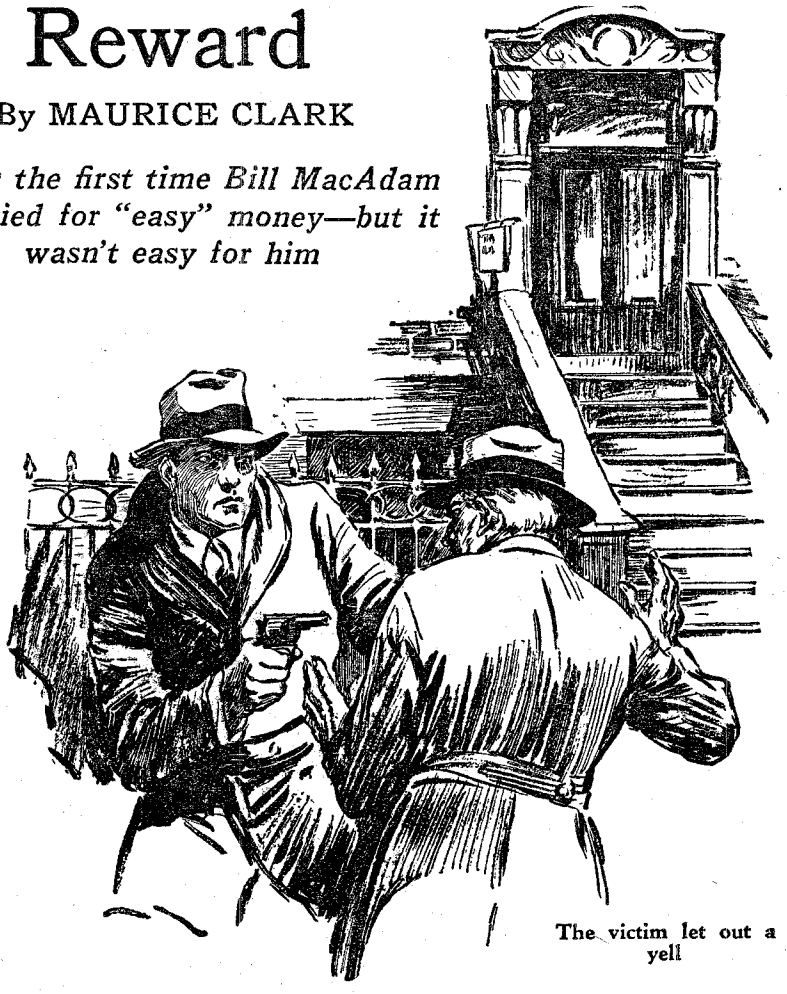
Reward

By MAURICE CLARK

It was the first time Bill MacAdam had tried for "easy" money—but it wasn't easy for him



The victim let out a yell

CONSCIOUSNESS came struggling back to Bill MacAdam with a burden of fear. He opened his eyes and reached out in the dark with a trembling hand. The cold brick of a wall, then iron bars. He closed his eyes again, resigned himself. They had him; there was no more need to struggle.

Presently the ground under him shook. He recognized the sound of a truck, long after it had rumbled on its way. A street close by! Hope gave him new strength, and he lifted himself on his elbows. A taxi with colored lights passed within a few feet. His sight cleared. He discovered that his head had been lying against a big packing box, his legs pressed against the iron fence of a basement stairway. Behind him rose the wall of a building.

He got up, crouching behind the box, and ventured a look up and down the street. On the corner, barely a hundred feet away, a policeman stood under a street light. Bill dodged back with a cold, sick feeling in his empty stomach. Was there any significance in the policeman's being there? Was the block guarded? He remembered his revolver. A quick search of his pockets did not reveal it, and he fum-

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bled in the grime of the sidewalk. The revolver was gone, he had no idea where. Nevertheless, he drew a deep breath of relief.

He looked again for the policeman, and saw him placidly crossing the street under the elevated pillars. When he was out of sight, Bill stepped out and hurried in the opposite direction. Walking brought life back into his body, and a growing sensation of pain made him lift his hand to his lips. They were thickly swollen and bleeding. He lowered his head and tried to hide them while he crossed the busy traffic of Second Avenue.

His room was in the next block. He slowed his pace to think how he would explain to Otto about the blood on his lips. It would have to be something far from the truth—not even the little truth he could remember. A fight? Knowing his quick temper, Otto might believe that.

He came to the door of the tenement house where he lived, and walked on past, trying to think up enough details to be ready with quick answers. But the facts would not stay back in his mind. Otto must never know.

In the distance, rising through the low houses which had been built in the days of his parents, a great tower threw its lights out into the sky. That was the last building which he and Otto had worked on before the highly paid employment of steel workers came to an abrupt, unbelievable end. They were prouder of that white shaft than any of the others. Even now, with their pockets nearly empty and their meals growing less frequent, it gave them courage to look up at it and to convey to each other without words the feeling that there must be a place left in the world for men who could build a structure like that.

Bill found no comfort in their tower to-night. It only increased the confusion in his desperate mind. He rounded the block and came back to the door. Dizzily, he went in through the narrow, dirty hallway and down the steps to their basement room. The room was dark. Otto was still out. That was luck. Bill lit the single gas jet, undressed quickly, and crawled under the khaki blanket on his cot. There was a chance now that Otto would not notice his battered face until morning.

Turning toward the wall, he waited, his skin cold and wet.

HOURS passed before the door swung open.

Big Otto Schulz shoved his cap back on his tow head. Three strides took him to Bill's side.

"Hey, kid, wake up! I got news!"

"Yeah?" mumbled Bill.

"We eat again!"

Bill made no reply.

Otto waited a moment. "What's the matter, kid?"

"I don't feel so good."

"Well, look here. This'll make you feel better." He dug two ten-dollar bills from his pocket and held them over Bill's head.

Bill turned over slowly, holding the blanket over his mouth.

"Where the hell did you get that?" he asked weakly.

Otto sat down by Bill's feet, the cot creaking under his weight.

"You won't believe this. It sounds phony as hell. But it's the God's truth. I'm walking down Tenth Street, on the south side, and I look across the street and seen two guys standin' there. First, I don't think anything about it; but for some reason I look again. and all of a sudden I says

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to myself, 'Gee, it's a stick-up!'—And of course there ain't a cop in sight—nobody in the whole damn block.

"Well, I don't know why I wanted to mix up in it, but I cross the street, thinking it'd scare the stick-up off. But he keeps right on friskin' the guy like he never noticed me comin'.

"I walk as quiet as I can in the dark, right up behind him—gee, I was shakin'!—and then, to make it worse, the guy that was being stuck up sees me and let's out a yell. Then I had to do something quick! And did I swing from the ground! Wham! Right to the button! The stick-up dropped like an ox in the corner behind a box; and me, I didn't wait for him to come back for more. I grabs the revolver off the sidewalk, and the other guy's pocketbook. And when I look up, the guy is just about to fall on his face.

"So I take him by the arm and drag him down to the corner of Third Avenue. 'Police!' he keeps saying. 'Listen, brother,' I says, 'did you ever see a cop at a time like this?' So I take him into that drug store on the corner of Ninth and Third and set him on a chair by the soda fountain. The druggist gives him a little shot of something in a glass, and that straightens him up a little. He was an old guy with gray hair—nice old guy.

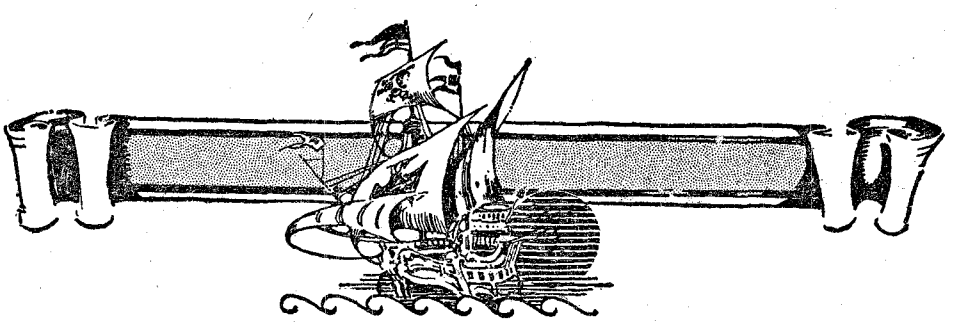
"Well, when I give him back his pocketbook he opens it right up and pulls out two tens. So I let him urge me a little, and then I takes 'em. 'Are you working, young man?' he asks, and I says, 'I'm a steel worker. That's the answer.'—'These days must be pretty hard for you, son,' he says. 'But when that money is gone, come to my office and there's more—till you get a job.' And he gives me a card.

"So I take him out to a taxi and I start back home down Ninth. Just up the block, I find the revolver still in my pocket—a rusty old gat without any bullet in it—and I drop it like a hot shot down the first sewer hole.—Well, here I am.—Now, don't lie there and tell me I got the jack in a lucky crap game. It's the real goods. Here's the twenty the guy gave me, and half of it's yours."

Bill lay staring up at the ceiling. "Oh, geez, Otto," he whispered through the blanket, "I can't take it. Geez, I can't take it."

"Sure you can! Wasn't that the dope, till we both got jobs—an even split?" Then he bent forward and held Bill's shoulder tightly with his huge hand. "But listen, kid," he said quietly, "don't pull no more dumb stunts like that, or you and me is quits. I mean it!"

THE END.



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Searching, malignant eyes were upon her

The Sapphire Death

By LORING BRENT

Author of " Sting of the Blue Scorpion," " The Master Magician," etc.

Only three candidates for Mr. Lu's priesthood had survived the tests; and one of these was Peter the Brazen, secret avenger

THE CHARACTERS.

PETER MOORE, an American who is known throughout the Orient as Peter the Brazen. At present he is in northern Indo-China, pretending to be an Annamese named Lak-Ching, and hoping that he will find an opportunity to destroy forever the power of his ancient and bitter enemy.

MR. LU, or the BLUE SCORPION, the enemy in question. He is a sinister and powerful figure in Asia, and has long sought to destroy Peter. He now believes, however, that two of his henchmen were successful in murdering Peter Moore.

Mr. Lu has built up a strange and fanatical religious cult which has its center in the Temple of the Coiled Serpent. In this temple is enshrined the famous sapphire-studded skull which is reputed to contain Mr. Lu's real—and living—brain. Once each year the priests of the temple choose a new high priest whose duty it is to guard the Sapphire Skull with his life. Peter Moore hopes to be thus chosen, for if he can succeed in stealing the Skull, he may be able to break the power of the Blue Scorpion. After months of training, in physical prowess as well as in the mystic arts of the East, he entered the barbarous contests which Mr. Lu had designed to test the contestants for the high priesthood—and out of one hundred and thirty contestants, only Peter and two others remain.

At the same infamous festivities, which Mr. Lu has invented quite as much for the amusement of his followers as for the elimination of those who

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seek to be high priest, Mr. Lu chooses the most beautiful of the young maidens among his followers, and at the climax of the ceremonies with his own hand slits her throat as a sacrifice to the Sapphire Skull.

SUSAN O'GILVIE, a wealthy young American woman. She and Peter Moore had loved each other and quarreled, and now she also believes Peter to be dead, murdered by Mr. Lu's order. She lives only for revenge upon the Blue Scorpion, and with that in mind she has prepared herself for the ghastly "beauty contest" which will result in the choice of the fair sacrificial victim. Neither she nor Peter is aware of the other's presence, here at the temple.

LAO LI, high priest of the Temple of the Coiled Serpent. He will retire, of course, after his successor has been chosen.

PARA KHAN, a Siamese prince who, like Peter, is a contestant for the high priesthood. He and Peter have become fast friends during the contests.

CHANG KONG, another contestant; a hairy giant of a man who has a special jealous hatred for Peter.

ZARI, an Annamese girl of great beauty, and like Susan, an entrant in the "beauty" contest. She is also smitten by Peter.

CHULA, Susan's faithful *amah*, or nurse and personal maid.

CHAPTER XX.

THE SLICER.

SURROUNDED by upwards of one hundred of the temple priests, Lao Li and the three survivors made their way through the milling mob toward the steps which led up the face of the mound on which stood the Temple of the Coiled Serpent.

There was a new, electrifying excitement in the air. The rumor had spread that Lu had arrived—was even now within the temple! Peter felt a moment's fear. If his luck held to the end—if he survived the final test—he would, for the first time since the enmity had started, see this grotesque Chinese—Lu—part man, part genius, part monster.

Once again, he devoutly wished that it was somehow possible for him to have a chance at killing this almost mythological figure who had gained such power over the continent of Asia. Lacking that chance, he hoped as devoutly to have a chance at stealing and destroying the infamous Sapphire Skull, thereby destroying a vast part of Lu's imponderable power.

His only fear was that Lu, when they looked at each other through the bars of the bronze grille, would recognize him. Yet he was certain that his appearance was sufficiently Oriental to deceive even such a diabolically shrewd observer as Lu.

The three survivors and Lao Li, protected by the priests, were nearing the top of the great flat mound on which the temple stood. The outer rim of this large plateau was a surging mass of pilgrims. It was supposed to accommodate one hundred thousand worshippers, and it seemed filled to capacity. In the brilliant moonlight, they were staring through the bars of the circular cage about the temple. This was the cage which enclosed the black leopards; and these savage beasts paced to and fro, staring malignantly at the crowd. They had been starved to the point of gauntness.

At the entrance to the enclosure, Lao Li and the three survivors and the temple priests stopped. A priest quickly touched two of the bars with his hands. Slowly, two parallel rows of bronze spikes rose out of the stone floor to a height of ten feet, forming a lane from the gate of the enclosure to the steps of the temple—a lane about ten feet wide into which no leopard

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could intrude. Halfway down this lane was the round, brimming pool of water which Peter had noticed before.

The gate before which the group of contestants and priests stood sank quickly into the masonry floor, and they entered the safety lane. When the last of them was in the safety lane, the gate rose up behind them again; and as they passed the pool, the high bronze grille ahead—barrier at the temple entrance—sank into the floor.

In all of this, Peter saw the ingenious hand of Lu.

ONCE they were inside the temple entrance, the great grille there rose up from the floor into which it had sunk. As it did so, the two lines of bronze spears forming the safety lane through the circular cage sank back into their places, out of sight, thereby permitting the leopards once more to roam over that area.

Just ahead in the temple was the pit of fire. It was perhaps twelve feet in diameter, and it gave off a soft hissing. Peter presumed that it was kept at white heat by the injection of air into pipes underneath. Into it the girl chosen by the priests for sacrifice, and then killed by Lu—the little golden lamb—would be tossed by the newly selected high priest.

Peter looked quickly about him as the three contestants were conducted past the pit of fire. From the pit, the wide flight of marble stairs went sharply upward into the gloom. The interior of the temple was lavish—an example of Oriental magnificence. The walls on either side of the stupendous staircase were great slabs of lapis lazuli inset with designs in silver and gold. This staircase was wide enough so that the worshippers, crowding about outside the leopard enclosure, could see to the very top. At intervals, the staircase was closed off by a bronze grille. Thus was any attempt on the life of Lu frustrated. Peter counted six of these barriers—or one at every hundred and fiftieth step or so.

There were other grilles. There was a grille set into the wall on either side of the fiery pit, for instance. Behind these grilles, Peter understood, the priests of the fire, in their red robes, gathered—were virtually prisoners—when the new high priest started down the stairs with the dead body of the "little golden lamb" in his arms.

Lao Li had opened a door beside one of these grilles. The three survivors and the temple priests went through and down a corridor, then up a spiral stairway. They passed through enormous empty rooms, climbed more stairs. Peter impressed this march on his memory—every turn, every twist, every climb.

Presently they entered a spacious room—the last—which was well illuminated with oil lights. In the opposite wall was set what Peter quickly guessed was the last of the tests. It was a perfectly round doorway, about ten feet in diameter. Beyond was gloom. At brief intervals, this doorway was closed by a shining sheet of oiled steel, which seemed to slide out from a slot in the wall.

Then Peter saw that the entering edge of this steel-sheet door was rounded. He realized that it was a disk of steel—a disk slightly larger in diameter than the doorway—and that this disk did not slide across the doorway and then back again, but that it entered from the right and vanished into the wall at the left. It was evident that the upper edge of the disk was bolted to a revolving axle hidden

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in the wall, and that this axle caused the disk to shoot past the round opening with extreme rapidity—and with extreme irregularity. Sometimes it paused, for a fraction of a second, blocking the doorway, and sometimes it paused in its orbit within the wall, leaving the doorway clear for a fraction of a second.

Peter understood all this without the explanation which the high priest was giving. He knew that the trick was to get through the doorway without being chopped in half—a trick virtually beyond human ability!

THE steel disk came slicing into view from the edge of the round doorway with such rapidity, such speed, and at such irregular intervals that unless one knew precisely how these intervals were timed by the hidden mechanism, he would be instantly cleaved in halves!

Studying this diabolical device, then glancing at Para Khan and Chang Kong, Peter reflected, "How can any of us survive?"

Within the next few minutes, the fate of the three of them would be determined—Peter, his friend, and his enemy.

The three had come far. Of one hundred and thirty men, all but they had been sacrificed to make this moment possible. They had fought through a bloody contest without weapons. They had fought cobras. They had fought with scimitars. They had walked across a field of withering heat. And only the three men remained. Who among them would survive? Para Khan? Chang Kong? Peter the Brazen? Would he lose his friend or his enemy, or both? Or would he, too, be split in halves by that diabolical disk?

Staring at the great steel disk as it sliced across the opening so rapidly, so irregularly, he did not believe that any of them would survive this final test.

The high priest was saying, "You are to draw lots. The first man chosen is permitted fifteen minutes in which to study just how the intervals are spaced. Draw lots!"

He passed out three numbered sticks.

Para Khan drew Number Two! Chang Kong, One; Peter, Three. Peter's heart was beating rapidly with nervous apprehension. His throat was dry again.

Para Khan walked over to him and put out his hand, which Peter grasped. The Siamese prince said, "Blessings of Buddha! If I miss—"

"Good luck!" Peter said, and they watched Chang Kong, who was staring with wrinkled brow at the doorway. For the first time since Peter had known him, the giant looked uneasy. Then his uneasiness seemed to go away. His brow cleared. He went close to the round doorway, watched the disk as it came slashing through, and began to laugh. He wheeled about and roared:

"By the toenail of Buddha, this is a game for children—not grown men! Anyone but a blind, crippled fool could leap through this door and escape that meat chopper!"

For the first time, Peter felt sympathy for Chang Kong.

"My advice to you," the high priest said to the giant, "is to study carefully the timing of that disk. It is not child's play. The chances against any man's getting through that doorway alive are one hundred to one!"

The giant jeered at him. "Child's play! Do I have another chance at

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breaking this fellow's back, if we both get through there alive?"

Lao Li said quietly, "First—get through!"

Peter was watching the round doorway and the flashing disk with its razor edge. There must be, he realized, some system in the very irregularity with which the blade flashed through the ten-foot aperture. And every so often, unless he was mistaken, this system would repeat itself—begin all over again. Sometimes the disk flicked across the opening a dozen times before you could draw a full breath. And twice, within the ensuing five minutes, Peter observed that the disk remained hidden from sight, leaving the doorway clear, for fully four seconds—ample time for a man to go safely through.

Realizing that his very life depended on it, it was difficult to concentrate, to memorize. His thoughts persisted in slipping off to a picture of himself being chopped in halves.

THE voice of the high priest spoke. "Chang Kong! Your fifteen minutes is about to begin!"

Chang Kong laughed. He glared at Peter and jeered, "On the other side of that door—we will meet again, my little Annamese pig! Your hours are numbered!"

"Unless your minutes are measured!" Peter answered. "Good luck!"

In that fifteen minutes, while the three had stared at the door, Peter believed he had solved the riddle of the disk's timing. It went through a definite routine of irregular halts and slashings *every five minutes!* And twice during those five minutes it halted in the wall long enough for a man to go safely through the doorway. But for a man to go safely through, he must know every one of the disk's hesitations and appearances *in their order!*

Did Chang Kong know this?

The giant strode to the door. He placed his hands on his hips and watched the slashing disk. He watched it for no more than fifteen seconds, then he crouched down. The disk of death hesitated.

As it vanished, Chang Kong leaped into the opening.

The disk instantly disappeared. The razor edge sliced into Chang Kong midway down the side of his body, below the right arm. It cleaved through him with as little effort as a sharp knife cuts through soft butter. His head, shoulders and arms vanished. The lower half of his sundered body fell back from the threshold into the room, gushing blood and spewing entrails. The steel disk appeared again, scattered drops of blood.

Peter's heart gave a sickening thump. A slime of perspiration formed on his forehead. He felt sick and weak, on the very brink of uncontrollable terror.

CHAPTER XXI.

GUARDIAN OF THE SAPPHIRE SKULL.

THE high priest said, "Para Khan."

There was a new sensation in Peter's brain, as if horror were sucking the last drop of blood from it. Almost too weak to stand, he watched Para Khan walk to the doorway of suicide.

The Siamese prince turned and looked at Peter. In his poet's eyes was horror at Chang Kong's ghastly, swift death. Para Khan's face, under its rich coloring, was wan. A grin tugged at his mouth. His lips moved,

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but Peter did not hear any sound from them. His own throat was too dry for speech.

Para Khan turned about and faced the doorway. The Siamese prince waited for fully two minutes, crouched, ready to leap. The disk clicked quickly four times, then hesitated, then seven times. Another hesitation. Two clicks.

"Now!" Peter breathed through clenched teeth.

Para Khan leaped, his head bent down and to one side. Peter clearly saw his profile. Para Khan was looking down; an expression of horror occupied his pale face. He vanished. The steel blade slashed down. Para Khan had gone through safely!

But what lay beyond? What had brought that look of horror to his face?

"Lak Ching, you must wait."

Why must he wait? What further demands could be made upon him beyond that dreadful disk? What was happening to Para Khan?

A tense and terror-filled ten minutes passed. Then there was a stir at the doorway behind him. A grave-faced priest came in. He murmured a message to the high priest.

Lao Li came to Peter and said, "Para Khan did not emerge."

"From what?" Peter cried.

"He is dead. It is your turn, Lak Ching."

Sick and weak with horror, Peter walked to the door. His legs hardly held him up. There was an awful emptiness at his stomach. Para Khan—dead! What monstrous fate had ended that tragic young life?

Peter faced the doorway, waited, crouched, forced his brain to concentrate on the routine of the deadly disk of steel. It sliced through the air with a hissing sound. He, too, would go through on the first of the four-second hesitations.

Beyond was gloom, almost black. Peter's mind was counting like a machine. The disk clicked four times, hesitated; clicked seven times. Another hesitation. Two clicks. Now!

Peter leaped, counting the seconds. One—two—three—

Below him was absolute nothingness! Four! He heard the steel disk hiss past behind him, missing him by inches.

He was falling! His heart beat frantically. Far, far, below him was a light. It rose toward him with the speed of a rocket. He was falling—It might have been a hundred feet; it seemed a thousand—inside a great, vertical tube, eighteen or twenty feet in diameter.

What was below him? Water! He caught the glimmer of it. Then, just as he plunged into it, he saw, floating upon it, the upper part of Chang Kong's body.

THE instant Peter struck the water, he spread arms and legs to check his descent. The impact knocked the breath out of him. Forcibly, he struck a smooth stone bottom at a depth of perhaps fourteen feet. He kicked himself back to the surface, gasping for air.

An oil flame, burning in a niche perhaps ten feet above the water, afforded the only illumination. For perhaps half a minute he floated, taking deep breaths, trying to calm the uproar of his heart.

Then he examined the wall of the tube. He swam about it, testing the stones. No escape there. Presently he took a deep breath and swam back to the bottom. There he found a round opening about thirty inches in

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diameter. Through this, presumably, he was to make his exit. He swam quickly down this tube. It ran horizontally. It turned, doubled back, went off in another direction.

Dekka had taught him to stay submerged for long intervals, but in those submergings Peter had never moved about. He had remained inert at the bottom of the little lake, counting the seconds. Staying under water depended solely on the endurance, the capacity of the heart. Terrific nervous strain such as this diminished the heart's capacity, and the energy, the oxygen used in the exertion of swimming, of pushing and pulling and kicking himself along the water-filled tube, was already heavily taxing that painfully built-up endurance.

While he swam along the tube, following its turns, he was counting the seconds. His limit was a few seconds over seven minutes. He had already counted off one hundred and eighty seconds—half the limit of his capacity. And suddenly he received a shock which all but proved fatal. Unexpectedly, his hands came into contact with a man's body. And in the next instant, as he slid on, his hands struck the end of the tube—a dead end!

So terrific was the combined shock of these almost simultaneous discoveries that he let some of the precious air supply escape from his lungs in an involuntary gasp of horror.

Rapidly, he ran his hands down the body of the dead man. And his horrified suspicions were verified. Para Khan! The Siamese prince had reached the dead end, and had either lost heart or exhausted his lung supply so that he had drowned!

Even in that moment when his own life depended solely upon his immediate retreat down the tube, Peter lingered seconds, filled with a mingling of hatred and grief over his friend's unfair and violent fate. Then he realized that he had lost count of time; had, in his horror and bitterness, neglected to tell off the seconds. His lungs were beginning to burn. He was conscious of the growing, suicidal impulse to exhaust the used air in his lungs at any cost. His heart was beating painfully.

The question was, was there enough time left for him to return to the tank and to get another lungful of fresh air?

As rapidly as he could, he began pushing himself backward down the tube. And these vigorous exertions, added to the strain already imposed on his heart by his previous efforts and his shocking discovery of his friend's dead body, drained his capacity to the point where he thought his lungs must surely burst.

He had the frantic, trapped feeling which comes in its worst form to a man who is trapped under water.

Back—back—back. In spite of his self-command, bubbles of air were leaking out of his nostrils and the corners of his mouth. And when that involuntary relinquishment of air begins, a man's doom is written.

HE came abruptly to the end. He had emerged from the tube into the great round tank! But long before he reached the surface, his lungs were gasping forth the used and reused air.

He reached the surface almost completely spent. He had, with the narrowest of margins, survived. For minutes he lay on his back, gulping in fresh air, giving his laboring heart a rest. And when he was certain that he was sufficiently refreshed, he took

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the deepest possible breath, and dived again.

This time, he explored the bottom of the tank thoroughly; and although he examined every foot of the bottom and the sides, he could find only one more opening. He wondered if this, too, had a blind ending—or if he had overlooked a more subtle way of escape? The second opening led into a tube that was larger than the other—perhaps forty inches in diameter.

Peter did not at once enter it; he rose to the surface for a brief rest and another supply of fresh air, then he swam down and into the new tunnel. This time he would not make the mistake of losing count of the elapsing seconds.

He swam and pushed himself along the slimy walls of the tube with the least possible effort. This tube, like the other, curved and twisted this way and that. Occasionally, there was a sharp right or left turn.

He did not grow concerned until he had counted three full minutes. And at that moment, the tube forked. Two tubes of the same size—one to the left, the other to the right! Which fork should he follow? He had no means of knowing in what direction he was supposed to be travelling, or even what his objective was; and there was no time to waste on reasoning. He would have to depend on his luck, therefore.

He decided on the left fork; and as he started along its slimy surface, he wondered if this final test did not call upon such superhuman qualities that an ordinary man could not possibly succeed. By strategy, skill and strength, he had so far survived—one man out of a hundred and thirty. But did he have the necessary stamina to win this last test, the most gruelling of them all? Chang Kong had failed because he was stupid. Para Khan had failed because his endurance, in the final analysis, was insufficient. But did Peter possess enough of both brains and endurance?

He was thinking thus, automatically counting off the seconds, when his head encountered a wall.—A right turn or a left turn? Neither! Another dead end!

The elapsed time from the beginning of his submergence was 272 seconds! Slightly more than four and one-half minutes!

In other words, there was left to him less than enough time to return to the tank! If he tried to return to the tank, he would reach the limit of his heart capacity, more than two minutes before he could possibly reach the surface!

And for the first time since he had adventurously entered the contests, he felt utterly hopeless, defeated. He saw no possibility of escaping this death trap. He would die as Para Khan had died—because he lacked sufficient endurance!

HE wasted no time as he returned to the fork. Reaching it, he counted off the three hundred and sixty-fourth second! Already, more than six minutes of his seven and a possible fraction were exhausted!

Now he started swimming and pushing his way along the right fork—and his faltering hopes received another blow. The tube was inclining sharply downward! It continued downward at an increasing angle, which sharply increased the demands on his swimming strength. He could feel the greater pressure on his eardrums, on his lungs, and in the heavier laboring of his heart.

And once again, in spite of his ef-

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forts, little bubbles began to escape from his nostrils and the corners of his mouth. Torturing pains began again in his heart. The necessity for freeing the used air from his lungs became almost imperative. He could not retain that burned-out air any longer.

Four hundred and twenty seconds! *Seven minutes!* He was clawing frantically at the water now, using his last ounce of strength in a final, despairing spurt of speed. No longer could he withstand the pressure, the heart strain. He *must* release the air—gulp in water—drown!

The tube inclined sharply upward. It became vertical. In spite of the air dribbling more and more rapidly from Peter's nose and mouth, he was shooting upward. A ruddy light shone down through the water. And all at once his head shot above the surface!

He expelled the spent air from his lungs, inhaled deeply. He looked dazedly about him, too bewildered at first to recognize his new surroundings. Oil tapers flickered. A familiar roaring sound filled his ears—roars of the mob!

Then he discovered that he had emerged in what he had supposed to be the leopards' watering pool. The bronze spears, forming that safety lane, were up, so protecting him from the black brutes.

Priests were swarming out of the temple toward him. At their head was Lao Li. Staggering with weakness, Peter climbed out of the pool and threw himself on the ground as the high priest approached.

Above the roaring of the mob he heard a familiar sound — a feminine shriek.

He saw her standing there against the bars of the outer gate—the golden girl from Hai Phong. Her face was pressed close to the bars. Her eyes were glowing with adoration. They were misty with tears of delight. And her smile was rapturous.

Gasping, shaking with exhaustion, he gave her a wan grin. The next moment Lao Li began to strip off his snow-white robe, and the uproar made it impossible for Peter to hear what he was saying. Peter did not know that the mob was roaring its approval of his victory—that he had become, by virtue of his fights with the giant Chang Kong, the mob's hero.

The high priest helped Peter to his feet, ceremoniously draped the white robe about Peter's shoulders—a signal to the mob that this young man was the victor in the series of terrific contests in which one hundred and thirty young men had entered—that he had become the new high priest of the Temple of the Coiled Serpent, the guardian of the Sapphire Skull!

CHAPTER XXII.

THE SECRETS OF THE TEMPLE.

WITH the white robe draped about him, the new high priest, staggering wearily, entered the temple with Lao Li, who now wore only a white loin cloth. Lao Li was talking, but it was impossible for Peter to hear him above the noise made by the crowd.

They passed the pit of fire. Lao Li led the way to a door to the right of it. They entered a large empty room of white marble. Here, the uproar of the mob was a far-away droning.

Peter's breathing gradually returned to normal. But his heart still pained him. He felt sick, and not in the least exultant. That he had proved himself the strongest, cleverest, most en-

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during of the hundred and thirty contestants was a triumph that he did not appreciate. Any exultation he might have enjoyed was killed by the shock of Para Khan's death. He had liked and admired Para Khan tremendously. A friendship such as theirs was one that should have gone on for many years. Sadly he told himself that he ought to be thankful that he and Para Khan had been so miraculously spared the necessity of facing each other in some combat to the death.

But this was slim comfort. Para Khan's death completely darkened the glory of a moment which any man might pardonably enjoy. The shock of his friend's death was like a dash of cold water, awaking him more sharply to the urgency of the task still ahead; namely, to steal and destroy the Sapphire Skull—to strike a death blow at Lu's power over Asia!

Lao Li was staring at him curiously. Peter, studying the lean brown face of the retiring priest, saw the beginnings of a cynical smile.

"All honor and glory!" Lao Li was saying. "To-night, you are to stand on the right hand of our master. There is much to explain. Perhaps we ought to begin at once."

Peter was returning the man's stare of curiosity with one no less curious. "Lao Li, what is to become of you now?" he demanded.

"I go with our master to the Lake of the Flying Dragon."

"What becomes of you there?"

Lao Li shrugged, still with that cynical smile. "Who knows?" He really was saying, with the fatalism of the East, "Who cares?"

Peter wondered—death, or the oblivion of a slave in that bizarre underwater palace?

Lao Li said, "You should feel glorified. You alone, of one hundred and thirty young men—the flower of the Orient—survived the cruel contests. A year ago, I felt that way."

"How do you feel now?"

"My friend, the affairs of this world are so much duckweed on the river. I am twenty-four years old. I have lost all my ideals—all my illusions—even hope. My home was the Shan Hills, of Burma. There I was an ironworker. I was to have married the most beautiful girl among the Shans—and they are the most beautiful girls in the world. She wanted luxury. She married a man who owns twenty elephants. She loved me—but a sable robe cannot be eked out with dogs' tails."

Lao Li dismissed his past, his present, his future with a sharp, hard, mirthless laugh; then he said, "We have much to do. There is much for you to learn. First, I will show you such of the plans of this temple as the high priest is permitted to see."

THESE plans were kept in an adjoining room, under a lock the key to which Lao Li surrendered to Peter. Lao Li explained the temple—such of it as the high priest was given access to. The other plans were in the possession of the warrior priests.

"Actually, this temple is a fortress. At a moment's notice, every entrance can be closed with great slabs of armor-plate. In the turret—to which you are not admitted—are machine guns and French field pieces, to hold off invaders. And when this place becomes a fort, it commands the surrounding country.—Our master thinks of everything.—Of course there are many secret passageways, known only to him. Many attempts have been made to seize the Sapphire Skull. Men

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have tried singly—and in force. But no one has succeeded, and no one ever will."

Peter said nothing. He was memorizing such plans of the temple as he, as high priest, was given the privilege of seeing; and he saw that it was impossible for a man to enter or leave the temple without going through the leopard enclosure, unless one had help from the outside. It was impossible to raise the double line of bronze spears forming the safety lane through the leopard enclosure, except from outside that enclosure.

In other words, if Peter wished to escape from this temple unaided—as he must—he must take the following route: he must go through the door of death, dive down through the underwater tunnel and emerge in the leopard's drinking pool, unprotected against the leopards! If he could live through the attack of these half-starved leopards, he could make his way in the enclosure to a bronze door set a quarter of the way around in the face of the temple. This led to an underground passageway which had an outlet about a mile away in the jungle.

Peter had knowledge of this passageway. He had proved that he could escape through the door of death and the water-filled tunnel. But—the leopards?

Lao Li was explaining other matters. There were inner and outer temple guards on duty day and night, throughout the year. There were guards whose duty it was to feed the leopards—sparingly—and there were other guards to spy on these. Within the temple was a small army of priests, actually guards, likewise, who were ordered to protect the high priest and to prevent his escape. There were guards over these—and guards set to watch the warrior priests constantly. In short, an intricate system of guarding and spying to prevent any threat against this priceless property of Lu's—the Sapphire Skull.

Peter's year-round task was to guard that Sapphire Skull. He would live in the room where the skull was kept. He would have servants at his command, but during the coming year he would not be permitted to leave these rooms except for a few days, when a new high priest, his successor, would be selected.

"Now, I'll show you the skull," Lao Li said casually. To him that priceless relic was apparently a matter of little importance.

They climbed stairways, went down corridors, climbed more stairways, always going up and up, nearer the very top of the temple.

LAO LI presently opened a door. "Here," he said.

Peter, with thumping heart, saw the glitter of the object in the light of the oil *dongs*. It stood between two *dongs*, on a pedestal of purest gold; glittering, twinkling, giving off a blaze of blue glamour. It was the size of a man's skull, and he concluded that either it was a human skull studded with sapphires—the largest stones Peter had ever seen—or it was fashioned after a human model, of some substance resembling bone. It was a thing of uncanny, bizarre beauty.

Across from it, and out from the wall, was a low marble bench upon which, presumably, a privilged worshipper might sit and adore the barbaric thing. But the Sapphire Skull was not for ordinary eyes.

Peter dismissed as premature the impulse to overpower Lao Li at once, seize the skull, and make off with it.

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He had come thus far without fumbling his chance. At this moment, the skull seemed to be unguarded. But no doubt it was being guarded most efficiently.

In one corner of this shrine—this inner holy of holies—was a thin straw mat. On this, Lao Li explained, Peter would sleep. Adjoining the shrine was a smaller room which gave upon a white marble platform on which stood a marble throne. There, at the top of the marble stairs, Lu would sit for the ceremonies!

Peter said, "Have you ever seen Lu?"

"No. No high priest has ever seen the master. This year, for the first time, he reveals himself. Always, in the past, his entrance has been preceded by a glare of blinding blue light—so dazzling that one can see nothing. A year ago to-day, I nearly lost my eyesight, staring into that blue glare for a glimpse of him. But I saw nothing!

"This year, he has announced that he will show himself to his people. For the first time, the people will see him actually cut the girl's throat. Always, in the past, she has climbed the stairs and entered the area of blinding blue light; and when the light diminished, she was lying on the floor, with her throat cut—the throne empty! Our master had come, cut her throat—and gone!

"In previous years," Lao Li went on, "it was the high priest's task to carry the skull down and show it to the people. This year, perhaps, the master wishes to take greater precautions. This year is the first time he, personally, will take the skull in his own hands and carry it down for the people to see."

Peter's heart was beating faster. For the first time since he had incurred the enmity of this powerful, almost mythical Chinese, Peter would meet Lu face to face!

Lao Li was again explaining the high priest's duties.

A grille, now closed, separated the high priest from the platform on which Lu's throne stood. It was a barrier of small but stout vertical bronze bars. In the center of the grille was a wicket about ten inches square, very much like the wicket at a paying teller's window in a bank.

Peter, thinking how easy it would be to shoot and kill Mr. Lu from this vantage point, recalled what Dekka had said, "Don't try to tote a gun into that temple. That would be absolutely suicidal, for long before you see Lu, you will be searched to the skin."

Peter believed he could have concealed a small automatic pistol in his loin cloth; but much as he would have liked to assassinate Lu, Peter would have hesitated. To kill that human monster would have meant instant death for his assassin, and Peter, having so successfully run the gantlet of death on various occasions, had no longing for death now. Life was too exciting. Beyond this temple, more adventures were waiting. By attempting to steal the Sapphire Skull, he would be running the risk of death, but at least he had a fighting chance.

LAO LI was saying, "I will have to ask you to strip to the skin. It is a precaution we always take."

Peter obliged. If he had concealed an automatic pistol in his loin cloth, he might have reached it in time to kill Lao Li. But the shot would have summoned guards.

When Lao Li was convinced that Peter was unarmed, he plunged into a

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description of the forthcoming ceremony.

Lu would come into the throne room through a secret passageway. When he was seated on the throne, the girl who, because of her superlative beauty, was selected to die, would walk up the stairs. Lu would slit her throat with the *parang* which he carried, then Lu would retire.

Next, by hidden mechanism, Lu would cause the grille at which they now stood to open. The high priest would go out, pick up the dead girl, carry her down the stairs and toss her into the pit of fire. Then the high priest would return to this cubicle, and Lu would cause the grille to close again. He would then reappear and come to the grille and open the wicket. The high priest would hand to him—through the wicket—the Sapphire Skull. Lu would walk down the stairs with this skull in his hands, and would display it to the worshippers. Coming back up the stairs, he would give the skull to the high priest and vanish. This would end the ceremony.

Peter, looking through the grille, could see all the way down the marble stairs to the pit of fire, a white-hot eye burning in the purple gloom below. Between the throne platform and the pit of fire were the six equally spaced bronze grilles. He mentioned them to Lao Li, and Lao Li explained.

"They are a precaution for protecting Lu. His claim—and these pilgrims believe it—is that he is absolutely immortal, that he is invulnerable, and that human hands cannot touch him or harm him. When any one walks down this stairway, these grilles are automatically lowered, one at a time, by concealed machinery. As one goes down, the grille ahead of you opens and the one behind you closes.

"Lu is at all times shielded from any form of attack. He is clever. He trusts no one—none of his priests, not even his high priest. The moment the ceremony starts, the priests of the fire will be shut behind the grilles on either side of the fire pit. Did you know that the Chinese engineer who designed the mechanism of this temple was killed at Lu's order the day the last piece of machinery was in place?"

"No."

"Did you know that every succeeding engineer or architect who has made changes in the temple has been killed the day his work was finished?—Our master, my friend, is a thorough man. For example, a year from now, you will not know the interior of the temple—aside from the great stairway. Everything else will have been entirely rebuilt. Once every year the high priest and the plans of the temple are renewed!—Are you sure the ceremony is quite clear to you?"

"Yes."

Peter was looking at a grille across the way. Apparently it was identical with the one behind which he and Lao Li now stood. "What's that for?" he asked.

"Lu's personal guards. They will appear a moment before he does, and they will stand there. In case of any threat to him, he releases them and they come swarming out. Our master—"

"—is a very thorough man," Peter finished. "What now?"

"I surrender myself to special guards. My work is done."

Peter believed he had the situation fairly well in hand. His plans were laid. When the ceremonies began, he would stand at the grille until the "little golden lamb" reached the top of the stairs to have her luckless throat

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cut. In the excitement attending her killing, he would seize the skull and make his getaway by the only possible route—through the door of death, down through the tank and the water-filled tube, then through the leopard enclosure and to the door which gave upon the underground passage leading into the jungle! He would have to chance the leopards.

CHAPTER XXIII.

ORIENTAL BEAUTY CONTEST.

ANOTHER strange elimination contest was getting under way meanwhile. But this had nothing to do with muscular power or quickness of wits; it was a contest concerned solely with beauty, and the girl who won it would have that highest of honors bestowed upon her—the sacred privilege of having her little throat cut! She would become "the little golden lamb."

While Lao Li was explaining to the winning contestant among the men the mysteries of the temple and the duties of the high priest, the maidens were assembling outside the leopard enclosure.

Some hours previously, Susan's preparations had seriously begun. Since an hour before the setting of the sun—the last sunset, perhaps, that Susan O'Gilvie would ever gaze upon—her *amah*, Chula, had been arranging her hair and making up her face.

A Chinese maiden's toilet is a long and tedious process. Her hair must be done according to rules as old as Confucius. Oils and perfumes must be applied in the proper order. Every hair must be in its assigned place. With equal care must the face be prepared.

But coiffure and facial perfection, in this bizarre beauty contest, were not all that counted in the selection, by the priests, of the little golden lamb. Susan had learned from Hing Sing Joy, in Singapore, that a contestant was also weighed according to the beauty of her costume.

The garment which Susan had had made for the occasion—under the supervision of Hing Sing Joy and Chula—had cost the richest girl in the world somewhat more than $160,000, in American gold. It was of hand woven silk, from the looms on the Irriwaddi; silk so fine, so lustrous that it was more than mere cloth. It was a living texture, of blue in many shades, with a life of its own like that of living skin. It was richly embroidered with precious stones—loops of pearls about the neck, emeralds on cuffs and sleeves, sapphires, diamonds, rubies placed elsewhere to the best advantage.

It was a barbarically beautiful costume—a fitting adornment to the American girl's slim, beautiful body—and in the left side, just under the left breast, was a cunning little pocket in which a small, keen, ivory-handled dagger was hidden. It had been ingeniously designed, that pocket, so that it did not appear to be a pocket at all, and so that Susan would have no slightest difficulty in snatching from it, when the time came, the dagger which she proposed to strike into the heart of the Blue Scorpion. In Singapore, she had practiced and practiced this part of her plan—the culminating step by which the murder of her lover was to be avenged.

She would murder the Oriental human monster who had caused the death of her lover—and then? Nothing else mattered. She would be brutally killed. To achieve this dramatic moment, she had so far spent, in bribing

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Hing Sing Joy, Chula and others, and for the making of her gem-studded robe, more than a half million dollars, in good American gold. Yet her fortune was still hardly scratched!

Susan's riches had long since ceased to have any importance to her. She blamed her wealth, in one way, for her loss of Peter Moore. Her millions—and his pride—had always stood between them.

When Susan climbed the steps up the mound to the entrance to the leopard enclosure to join the other girls, she went alone. Chula's work was done. Chula had done everything for her that was humanly possible. Chula would slip away now, vanish.

SUSAN was no longer afraid, no longer even nervous. She had gone over all this so often in her mind. Her thoughts were exalted; and her exaltation marked her with an unearthly beauty.

Surrounded now by other girls, at the gate to the leopard enclosure, a corner of her mind was amazed that so many girls should strive to sacrifice themselves. But Susan had long ago abandoned the attempt to understand Oriental human nature, or the Oriental's weird belief in his horrible gods.

She watched the starved black leopards pacing back and forth in the enclosure, lashing their long tails, glaring with murderous yellow eyes at the faces close to the bars. Now and then, one of the ravenous black beasts, with a screaming snarl, would hurl itself at the bars and strike out with horrible claws at a face that came too close. Then there would be shouts of laughter from the mob.

A priest elbowed his way among the girls to the enclosure gate. As Susan watched, she saw two parallel rows of stout bronze spears rise out of the ground and form a lane from the gate at which she stood to the enormous bronze grille over the temple entrance.

There were shouts from the mob when a leopard was imprisoned in this safety lane. The spears went down into the ground again; and when the leopard had prowled away, the spears again magically rose out of the ground.

The gate into the safety lane was now opened. When all the girls were inside, the gate was closed. Led by the priest, the girls flocked past the round pool. The great grille ahead of them now sank into the ground, and the girls were led up the steps toward the pit of fire.

Susan shrank from the blast of its heat. Would it be her lifeless body that would be carried down the marble stairway and thrown upon this bed of flaming coals?

A dozen of the fire priests, in their red robes, took the assembled girls in charge. The girls, numbering about a hundred, were instructed to form in a line, side by side, on the lower temple step, facing the crowd. Susan, standing near the middle of the long line, looked at the girls on either side of her with growing apprehension. Chula's optimism had made her confident; now her confidence began to ebb. All the girls she had seen so far were beauties, and their costumes were imaginative and beautiful; some of the costumes simply intended to reveal the lovely lines of the figures inside them, others frankly barbaric and striking.

On her left stood a northern Chinese girl in jacket and trousers—a bell-shaped, flaring turquoise jacket and magenta trousers. She wore ear pendants of jade, and jewelled slip-

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pers. On her right was a Burmese girl, startling in her costume of coral pink, at neck, wrists and hem of dress small gold bells which tinkled when she moved. Because of her shivering, the bells set up a steady golden sound. In her hair was a cluster of kingfisher feathers. Farther down the line, Susan saw the small golden girl who had haunted her *sala* all afternoon. This one wore nothing but a jade-green *sarong* which fell from slim hips to little golden feet—naked feet. Evidently she was relying upon the sheer beauty of her face and body.

The air was heavy and sweet with seductive perfumes. The soft golden glare of the countless oil torches picked out glittering jewels in hair, at ears, at throats, and sewn into the amazingly beautiful costumes. In that strong, steady glare, they were like girls on a stage, with the arch of the great temple behind them.

LOOKING anxiously at the girls on either side, Susan was growing more and more concerned. Never had she seen such brilliant fanciful costumes. There was one girl in a gown made of tiny jade beads. Another was dazzling because of the ropes of large diamonds which were sewn into her hair. Still another girl's face, hands and feet were thickly gilded. Her features were sculpturally perfect; and her face might have been that of a golden statue, so perfect was its balance.

Here was represented the very flower of Oriental feminine beauty—girls who had come from the remotest parts of Asia: from Java, from Turkestan, from China, Siam, Malaya, Burma.

As the girls lined up, chattering and squealing in their nervousness like so many birds of brilliant plumage, the crowd which they faced roared its approval.

Six priests in flame-red robes—the high priests of the holy fire—were moving slowly down the line. The eliminations were under way!

Susan, watching, felt cold waves of fear dancing up and down her spine. Why, she asked herself, should she have believed that she had the slightest chance of winning this fantastic beauty contest? All her life she had been told that she was exceptionally beautiful; but she was not vain, and she was cynical. Chula had declared that Susan was by far the most beautiful girl in this year's contest, but Susan had paid Chula enough gold to permit the *amah* to live luxuriously for the rest of her days—and why, after all, should Chula care?

Moreover, Susan argued, as the priests came closer and closer to her, her beauty was that of the Occident, not of the Orient. By Oriental standards, her beauty was entirely synthetic. These other girls were true Oriental beauties; she was a beauty who had made herself over according to Oriental requirements.

The mob was roaring its approval or disapproval of the priests' decisions. If some girl who was a favorite of the mob was told to drop out, the mob snarled its displeasure. If she was permitted to remain in the line, the mob cheered.

As for the rejected girl, when she was told to drop out of the line she generally did so reluctantly, and under great protest. She screamed, or she sobbed, or she argued. But there was no appeal from the priests' decisions. If one of the contestants was told to drop out she went, or was forcibly taken by priests in gray to stand at one side of the arch.

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The high priests of the holy fire had stopped before the girl on Susan's right. Susan would be next!

The little golden bells which adorned the costume of the Burmese girl were now setting up a musical din. Suddenly their tinkling stopped. The Burmese girl screamed.

Eliminated!

Now the six priests were considering Susan. Glittering black eyes in a brown square face peered into hers. It was as if she were an insect under a magnifying glass. The little black eyes studied hers for so long an interval that Susan began to feel faint. Her tell-tale violet eyes! Had Chula made that story of her eyes sound convincing?—The black eyes roved about her face, her hair, her ears, her neck.

In an instant, another pair of eyes, this time greenish-brown, in a thin, bony yellow face, replaced them. These eyes came within inches of hers. The man bent closer. His eyes came so close that his eyelashes almost touched Susan's. She wanted to scream. In those eyes, it seemed to her, there was something malignant; it was like staring into the eyes of an octopus.

Then came a third pair of black eyes; close-set, inscrutable, likewise terrifying. This man put thick, sticky fingers to her lips and parted them. He bent close and looked at her teeth.

IN a surge of hysteria, Susan wanted to shriek, to laugh, to sob. The eyes went on—and still another pair replaced them. Susan steeled herself, but her terror grew. Since she had been in China, she had often been in danger, but never had she been quite so unstrung as she was now.

Even when she realized that the first inspection was over, and that she had not been eliminated, she experienced little relief. She felt ill. She was afraid that she would faint; and a girl who fainted, Chula had told her, was automatically eliminated.

The priests were going on down the line. Girls shivered; one of them screamed. Priests in gray behind the line seized this girl and carried her, struggling, to the growing throng of the unsuccessful.

In that first inspection, the priests had eliminated more than three-quarters of the contestants; and only about twenty-five girls remained. Among these, Susan, the girl in the green *sarong* and the girl with the gilded face, hands and feet, remained.

Now the next stage of the elimination began. Susan, as the priests once again started down the line, told herself that she could not longer stand it. Her stamina was used up. Her grief for the past six months had left her weak, and the strain of the past few days had used up what little nervous reserve remained. She knew that under her powder and paint her face was white and haggard. She knew she must look ghastly, with her glittering eyes and drawn mouth.

There was another shriek of hurt pride, of insulted vanity or awful despair. One by one, the priests were deciding against the girls who remained.

But the protests of the losers came faintly now, and the crowd was voicing its partisanship more lustily. Large groups of young men had their favorites, and when these favorites were told by the relentless priests to withdraw, the groups angrily protested.

Susan knew that most of this tumultuous mob was drunk to-night on *lehpet*—"pickled tea"—which was not so much an intoxicant as it was an irritant which attacked the lining of the

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stomach, causing an intense inner excitement and producing hysteria.

The priests were now inspecting the little half-naked girl from Hai-Phong. She met their eyes unflinchingly, with her chin up, her shouders back, her fists resting impudently on her hips. Susan saw her suddenly smile, excitedly. The girl in the green *sarong* had survived the second inspection!

Now the priests had reached Susan again, and this time their scrutiny of her was more thorough. They came close, they stood off. They inspected her as carefully as if she were a slave on the auction block. Greater attention was paid to her costume. The gems were examined. One priest even got down on hands and knees and examined her diamond-studded blue sandals.

Under the mingling stresses of hope and despair, her heart was thumping. That she had survived the first inspection seemed a miracle. That she had entered such a contest at all was a presumption.

Susan told herself that the girl in the green *sarong,* now glaring at her with hatred and scorn, was far more beautiful than she was.

BUT the priests went on—and still she survived. The line had shrunk. On her right stood the girl in the green *sarong.* Beyond her was a Javanese girl, in starched black silk trimmed with little raw nuggets of gold. Her headdress was a magnificent confection of gold and emeralds and diamonds. It rose to a peak, like a witch's hat, and at the peak was the largest diamond Susan had ever seen —a stone as large as a pigeon's egg. Susan, who had seen the great Kohinoor Diamond, among the crown jewels of England, believed that this gem was even larger. She had been told that there existed, in southern Asia, unlisted gems larger than those in any crown collection of Europe.

Her eyes, hot with nervous excitement, went back to the priests. A girl in golden yellow satin embroidered with blue and red dragons was kicking and screaming in the arms of several gray-robed priests. And the priests were considering another girl; a beautiful, sullen creature, tall and voluptuous, with heavily mascaraed eyes and a sullen, sensuous mouth. She tossed her head this way and that, coquettishly; she posed, flashed her eyes from side to side, and ran her long, tapering hands down her sides in gestures calculated to be irresistible.

This girl's fury, when she was informed that she was out of the running, was magnificent. It was as if, within that voluptuous creature, a crouching tiger had leaped to life. She shrieked insults at the priests, beating into the palm of one hand with the clawlike fingers of the other, stamping her feet, tossing her head in a very tempest of fury.

Then priests in gray laid heavy hands upon her, dragged her, kicking and screaming, into the group of unsuccessful aspirants.

The priests had concluded their second inspection. But seven of the original hundred-odd now remained. The mob, outside the bars of the leopard enclosure, had gone mad. Fists flew in excited gestures. The air fairly shook with the uproar of voices.

A gray priest produced a round, red-lacquered pedestal about two feet in height. On this, the girls were to stand, one at a time. Susan went first. She stood on the pedestal and looked out over the crowd. The crowd became silent, and in the stillness she could

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hear the savage snarling of the starved leopard. Then the crowd roared.

THE judges, however, were evidently not to be swayed by the crowd's opinion. Once again, with a patience and care that made their former inspections seem superficial, they studied Susan. They walked about her; they came close; they backed away; they cocked their heads.

Then, after minutes of dreadful suspense, they gathered together for a consultation. At the end, one of them raised his arms, palms up. He was the high priest of the holy fire. He meant that Susan was still in the running.

Next, the girl with gilded hands, face and feet went to the pedestal. Another roar of approval greeted her barbaric, statuesque beauty. The priests considered her, then consulted. The high priest lifted his arms, palms downward. — Eliminated! Priests seized her arms and impelled her, although she did not resist, to the ranks of the disappointed.

Now came the Javanese girl. Her mouth was convulsing. Her eyes were tear-stricken. The magnificent diamond which capped her be-gemmed golden headdress fluttered and danced and flashed like an eye in the head of an infuriated serpent.—Yet she was eliminated, and sobbing, she stepped down from the lacquered pedestal and walked without urging to the large group, while the mob snarled its disapproval.

Then came the girl in the flashing garment of jade beads. She held up her head arrogantly, as though she were a little queen; but her lips, too, were quivering.—Soon she was eliminated.

The fifth girl was Japanese, and her costume was one of the most beautiful Susan had seen—a court kimono of richest orange, with an *obi* of midnight-blue encrusted with sapphires. Nevertheless her nervous smile gave her an idiotic look, and she, too, joined the unfavored ones.

A Malayan girl, thin, exotic in a purple costume which might have adorned the goddess Siva, followed. Her dark eyes, in a thin face, were enormous, beautiful. She was of the melancholy, the madonna type! Despite that, when she was eliminated she bared teeth, distorting her face with a rage that was anything but saint-like.

Last of all came the girl in the green *sarong*. She went laughing to the pedestal, and struck another impudent pose, with legs crossed, one hand on hip, the other pointing straight up over her head. She looked as if she might, on the slightest provocation, spin into a wild dance. Her white teeth flashed. The ruddy light glowed and gleamed on the perfection of her golden skin.

The priests considered her. They walked about her. Then they conferred. And while the priests consulted, the mob shouted, danced, banged on the bars of the leopard enclosure.

The high priest of the holy fire lifted his hands, palms up! The golden maiden threw her other arm into the air, entangled her fingers, clasped the back of her head and wriggled her hips. The roar of the mob reached a higher pitch. Here was, indeed, a favorite!

She climbed down, and her smile, her animation, vanished. She looked at Susan with thin lips, glowering brows, eyes glinting with loathing. The victory lay between these two.

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Like moths, Susan's fingers flitted over the cloth which concealed the dagger lying under her heart.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE MAN OF THE JADE BRAIN.

PETER was standing at the grille in the cubicle adjoining the "skull room" when he saw men in black appear at the grille across the marble platform from him. Tall, silent fellows these were, all in black, with wide red leather belts. From the belt worn by each man hung a leather sheath containing a long knife like a monstrous bayonet! The Blue Scorpion's personal bodyguard! No man in contact with Lu, Dekka had told Peter, was ever permitted to carry a firearm. No one who might wish to betray the master with an unexpected shot was ever allowed within range of him.

The heart of the new high priest speeded up to trip-hammer tempo; he was conscious of thrills along his nerves. Lu—the Blue Scorpion—the most sinister, most mysterious, most powerful figure in all of Asia—was about to appear! For the first time, Peter was to see him as he actually was — shorn of his legendary attributes!

Twice, Peter had had interviews with Lu, but he had never been permitted to glimpse the person of Mr. Lu.

Even as he waited for Lu to appear, knowing that that infamous man must conform, in however distorted a way, to some human conception, Peter felt himself shivering, as if he were about to glimpse some hideous monster—so realistic were those old legends which Lu had created about himself.

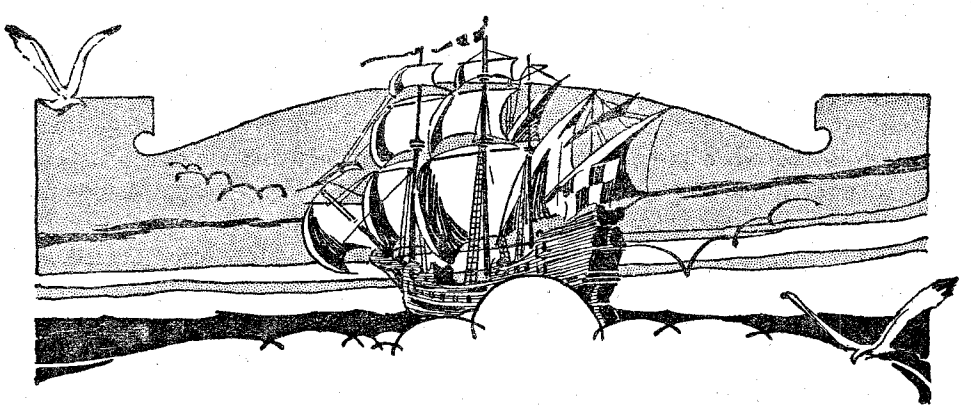
Suddenly, to left and right of the marble throne, dazzling blue light blazed forth.

It was the blue of sapphire—pure, intense, vivid blue flame—a blinding blue glare.

As it appeared, a hush fell on the watching mob on the terrace outside the leopard enclosure, far, far below.

Lu, the immortal, the imponderable, the deathless Oriental genius of evil, was about to appear!

TO BE CONCLUDED NEXT WEEK.



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"Where is that hammer?" demanded the sergeant

All the Signs

By THEODORE GOODRIDGE ROBERTS

A bloody ax, a drifting boat—those were the first clews Jerry Nevers found in that Canadian mystery

JERRY NEVERS found Abel Duveen's clinker-built sturgeon boat drifted down and stuck against the outer stakes of his salmon net. In the bottom of the narrow boat lay an ax; and there was blood on the bit of that ax.

"Now what d'ye make of that?" Jerry asked himself. "Looks like Abe's been drinkin' again and forgot to drag her up high an' dry; or he's fell overboard—but he can swim, drunk or sober. But what was he doin' with the ax, to get blood on it?"

He towed the Duveen boat ashore, stranded it and his own old pine log canoe, crossed the beach and climbed the bank and made all haste for home. He was a bachelor; and an elder sister who had been crossed in love and was of a gloomy disposition kept house for him. Poor Jane! With her gloom and her constant attitude of disapproval, she was a depressing companion. But one human weakness, at least, remained to her. A nippy piece of news always brought her out of her gloom, if only for a minute or two. So Jerry hastened home with the news.

He found Jane on the back porch, preparing to churn.

"Abe Duveen's boat must ha' went adrift," he said.

She gave him a brief but loaded look which said:

"What now, you poor nit-wit?"

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"I found it l o d g e d agin the net-stakes," he added.

"Ump. Drunk again. What of it?"

"There was an ax in that boat—and it was all bloody."

That got her.

"A bloody ax! Do tell!"

"That's all I know."

"Where's the ax now?"

"In the boat."

Jane left the porch and ran for the river; and Jerry followed.

They reached the boat; the ax was not there.

"Where's your ax?" asked Jane gloomily.

"It was right there," said Jerry, pointing at a wad of sodden old sacking which lay in the wet, narrow bottom of the boat. "That's where I left it. I didn't touch it."

He looked around him at the dry pebbles of the beach, then out at the shining river.

"You're a fool," said Jane gloomily. "Maybe somebody's been murdered—an' then you go an' lose the lethal weepon."

"It was an ax, like I told you," replied Jerry. "An' how did I lose it, seein's I never so much as laid a finger on it? Somebody must-a took it."

"It didn't walk off by itself, I reckon," returned Jane.

"Maybe I'd best go see if anybody's hurt?" he suggested.

"What else would you do—you great lummox?" she retorted. "And I'll go along too, for fear you might lose yourself."

ABEL DUVEEN'S farm lay about three miles farther upstream, on the same side of the river. What with patches of swift water, and towing the pine dugout along for the return trip, the Neverses were well over an hour on the way. They landed and pulled boat and dugout high enough to hold.

Nothing living was in sight except wild bees, a wobbling yellow butterfly, and a fish-hawk high up in the clear blue. The beach was narrow here and backed by a steep bank from which all the bushes had been torn away by last spring's running ice.

The bank was topped by thickets of choke-cherry and overhung by five old willows whose roots had been partially exposed by the undermining of the bank. The Duveen residence, which was no more than a log shack, was hidden from view by the cherries and willows.

The brother and sister stood at the river's edge uncertainly for several minutes, glancing nervously, here and there, listening anxiously.

"It's a wonder Rover ain't here before now," said Jerry. "He's real friendly, and sharp of scent and hearin'."

Jane gave him a quick, strange glance, moving her eyes only to do so. A covert glance, with something of suspicion in it and a flicker of fear. Jerry did not notice it. He was gazing anxiously at the narrow, footworn path in the face of the bank.

"We might as well go on up an' ask, seein' we're here," said Jane.

It was a scramble up the bank. Jerry led the way. At the top they stood and stared at the log house twenty paces away, and at Mrs. Duveen herself who stood on the narrow floor of the rickety porch looking at them.

Ellen Duveen was a young woman and on the small side; but small though she was, the raggedy cotton dress she wore was none too big for her. She was pretty too, but she had been prettier before life with Abe Duveen had set

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queer lines in her face and a queer light in her eyes.

Now she stood looking at her callers without a word or a gesture of welcome.

Jane Nevers was the first to move. She moved toward the house, and Jerry followed.

"Good day, Mis' Duveen," she hailed at ten yards' distance, without checking.

"Good day, Miss Nevers," returned Ellen.

The Neverses halted in the chip yard, within a few feet of the edge of the porch.

Jerry noticed that the ax was not in its usual place in the chopping block.

"We fetched your boat home," said Jane.

"Much obliged," whispered the other woman.

"Jerry here found it drifted against his salmon net."

"Oh! That was real good of you."

"We thought maybe something—you folks were in some sort of trouble."

At that Mrs. Duveen's face twitched and seemed to crumple like a piece of starched linen in a strong hand. She uttered a pitiful, brief cry and turned away with bowed and quaking shoulders.

Jane Nevers stepped up onto the porch.

"What's your trouble?" asked Jane. "Where's your husband?"

This was too much even for quiet, peace-loving Jerry.

"Leave her be!" he cried savagely. "Did you come here to torment her?" and he made a long arm, grabbed Jane by a shoulder and yanked her off the porch. His mild eyes were blazing.

"Well, I never!" exclaimed Jane in a white-hot voice. "You fool! What's eatin' you?"

Ellen Duveen was sobbing bitterly, with both hands pressed to her eyes.

Between her sobs she articulated broken phrases.

"Abe's somewheres 'round — gone fishin', maybe—he's drinkin' again—somethin' awful."

JANE and Jerry Nevers went home in the pine log canoe, in a strained silence. Jerry was thinking, "I got to get back—and fix Abe Duveen somehow, for keeps."

Jane was thinking, "That hussy's made a fool of Jerry—and got quit of Duveen with an ax, I wouldn't wonder—but she's got me to reckon with."

They had not been home more than half an hour when Jerry said that a certain brush-fence needed mending in the worst way. He shouldered an ax and strode into the woods; and the moment he was screened from his sister's view he headed upstream and quickened his pace. And it was much the same with Jane.

Throughout the past half hour she had been as eager to get away from him as he had been to give her the slip. The moment he was out of sight she took the road for the next farm downstream. It was less than two miles away and had a telephone.

Jane was the first to return. She reached home fully two hours before her brother, made a fire and cooked a large dinner. She was hungry and quite cheerful.

When Jerry arrived she warmed up the victuals and steeped fresh tea for him. She said nothing about her visit to the Caulder place, nor did she ask him where he had been; and she tried, though without entire success, to resume her habitual manner of gloom.

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Jerry went to bed in his clothes that night—in everything but his boots. He did not sleep; and at the first peep of dawn he stole down the back stairs with his boots in his hand. He crossed the kitchen without a sound, unbolted the door and opened it and sat down on the threshold and pulled on his boots. He stood up, turned and was about to close the door behind him when the voice of Jane addressed him from the interior gloom.

"Where'd you think you were goin' to this time of night?"

It was startling. He felt a prickly jerk at the root of every hair of his head. But that reaction passed in a moment, and the next was worse. Anger fairly burned him. It twitched his muscles and nerves.

It dried out his mouth and tongue so that he could not speak for a second or two.

He stood trembling, staring into the gloom of the big kitchen. Jane was a woman. Jane was his sister. Otherwise, Jane would have come to a sudden and violent end, there and then. He spoke with difficulty, in a strange voice.

"Think? I know where I'm goin'—and that's none of your business—you—you stony-hearted devil!"

The words were sufficiently astonishing and appalling, but it was not the words so much as the tone of voice which struck Jane Nevers dumb and rigid.

Was this the voice of the gentle, inarticulate, dutiful, easy-going Jerry whom she had known ever since his birth and ruled with a rod of gloom these ten years back? What alien, reckless, wicked spirit had she aroused in him?—or was it that the violent stranger had always been there, unsuspected by her until yesterday, undiscovered in all his hostility and wickedness until now?

She must save him.

She had already made one move toward his salvation—and she had herself to consider, too. Half the farm was hers—but of what use would that be to her, without Jerry to work it? She had no other man to look to for help. Jerry was her brother, and she was his sacred duty in life—but there he was, this very minute, running the woods after another man's wife—after the wife of drunken Abe Duveen. Did he call her a stony-hearted devil? So be it! She would show him that she had a heart of stone for his salvation—and her own.

JERRY NEVERS ran himself ragged along the shortest but roughest way between his place and the Duveen clearings. He stumbled often and fell to his hands and knees twice. When he reached that humble farmstead at last it was clear daylight, and he had to rest on the chopping block for a few minutes to ease his laboring lungs and nurse his barked shins.

"I seem to be in a hell of a hurry all of a sudden," he said to himself grimly.

He inspected the horse and cow and calf in the "hovel" or log barn. He wandered around, always with an eye on the little house. He could see no sign to suggest the return of Abe Duveen. He did not knock on the door until smoke showed at the chimney.

"Who's there?" asked Ellen.

He told her, and she opened the door.

"I was afeared it might be him," she whispered.

"You were afeared all night," he said huskily. "An' so was I. It come over me all of a sudden, yesterday—

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what a store I set by you. What if he was to take at you again with an ax—an' no Rover to help you now?"

At mention of the dog, the woman's tired eyes filled with tears. Jerry shuffled his large feet uncomfortably and looked fit to cry himself.

He produced a small revolver from a pocket.

"You can handle this," he said. "There's six shots here. All you got to do is p'int it an' pull the trigger. Keep it handy—an' if ever he takes at you again to murder you, let him have it."

She shook her head.

"No. Then I'd be the murderer."

"That wouldn't be murder—to save yer own life—from that murderin' devil!"

"The jedge an' jury would call it murder."

"Listen, Ellen. If you—if he got killed—say it was me shot him. No, you say nothin'. It's my gun—and I'll say I shot him—even if they hang me for it!"

"No. What if he does kill me? I might's well be dead as this way."

Jerry went home and did the morning chores. Breakfast was as usual—but not a word did Jane say to him during the meal, and not a word did he say to Jane.

After breakfast he set to work in the nearest potato patch. But he could not keep his mind off Ellen Duveen's danger. An hour dragged past, and thirty slow minutes more; and then he unhitched old Bill from the cultivator and stabled him. Now he would travel that trail through the woods again and let Jane make what she chose of the action.

But as he stepped from the stable he heard the rattling of Dave Caulder's car. That remarkable machine rounded a corner of the house and drew up with a clanging shiver outside the kitchen door.

Jerry stood as if rooted in the ground, staring. He saw two members of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police in the car with Dave. What the hell? He saw Jane issue from the kitchen and advance to the car. She was more neatly attired than was usual with her so early in the day—dressed "for company," in fact. Now what was Jane up to? Had she sent for police protection for Ellen Duveen? Not likely. Then what?

Jerry uprooted his feet and crossed the barnyard and woodyard to the car; and Jane, who had been talking very fast, became suddenly silent. Dave Caulder and the policemen turned their heads and looked at Jerry.

"HOW-DO, Jerry," said Caulder. "This here is Sergeant Tombes, and this is Constable Gravey, both of the Mounties. They wouldn't resk their gover'ment car no farther than my place, so I fetched 'em along."

Tombes and Gravey nodded and smiled, then continued to look at Jerry as if expecting him to say something worth hearing. Jerry had nothing to say, but was eager to hear. So he only smiled.

Some one had to say something, so the sergeant spoke up.

"What do you know about this Duveen case, Mr. Nevers?"

"Plenty!" replied Jerry. "He's a case, sure enough! The hardest I know. He'd ought to been locked up long ago, or put on the Injun List. But he's bad, drunk or sober?"

"Have you seen him this morning?"

"No, for he wasn't there. But he

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left two square-faces in the house, so he'll be back before long."

"Well, we must be getting on with it," said the sergeant.

But he did not move, beyond lowering his gaze from Jerry's open countenance to the toes of his own highly polished brown boots. For fifteen seconds or so he maintained a reflective silence and that considering attitude. Then he raised his head sharply and looked straight into Jerry's eyes.

"You were the last person who saw that ax," he said.

"Me?" returned Jerry in a patient tone of voice. "No. The person who carried it off saw it after I did—unless he was blind. Or maybe 'twas an animal carried it off. It's a mystery to me."

"There was blood on it," said Sergeant Tombes.

"Sure! The blood of a good dog."

"Oh! I hadn't heard that. Dog's blood, you say, Mr. Nevers?"

"That's what I say. And if it hadn't been dog's blood it would surely have been human blood."

"You seem to know all about it."

"I know what Mis' Duveen told me."

"I'd be glad to hear what she told you, Mr. Nevers."

"Well, this was the way of it. Duveen got drunk an' took at her with the ax. He'd often beat her with a stick when he was drinkin', but that was the first time he'd swang an ax at her. She hollered an' dodged around the table; an' the dog Rover come in on the jump and flew right at him. She made for the door an' down to the river, without stoppin' or lookin' back to see what was happenin'. She knew he was murderin' mad.

"She shoved the boat clear an' jumped into it. There was a paddle in it. She pushed into deep water an' then begun to paddle, headed downstream. But she hadn't got far before he come a-jumpin' an' splashed into the river an' let fly at her with the ax.

"In side-steppin' the ax—it landed in the boat, within an inch of her—she fell out. When she come up, she hung to the off-side of the boat. She drifted with the boat for a spell, till the fear of drowning took hold of her.

"She got ashore, boat an' all, among some bushes—but she didn't drag the boat high enough to stick, I reckon. She sneaked home after a while. Duveen wasn't there. But the dog was there in the kitchen, all chopped up—but he wasn't dead. She had to finish him off—with a hammer—an' that broke her all up. She was lyin' there on the floor, a-cryin', when Billy Bender wandered in. He's a queer character, harmless as a baby but crazy as a coot. He buried the dog for her, an' washed up the floor, an' went on his way. I found the boat next mornin'—yesterday—lodged in the stakes of my salmon net; and we took it home."

"It sounds reasonable," said Sergeant Tombes. And then, "You don't like Duveen, Mr. Nevers."

"Like him!" exclaimed Jerry. "Even his own dog didn't like him!"

THE five of them went along in Dave's car, but they did not go all the way in her. She quit, with a terrible rattle and shiver, half a mile this side of the Duveen place. The policemen and Jane and Jerry went on afoot, leaving Dave Caulder busy taking that old machine apart and trying to put her together again.

Ellen Duveen was sitting on the narrow porch. Abe had not returned. She told Sergeant Tombes exactly what he had already heard from Jerry Nevers.

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"Where is that hammer?" asked the sergeant.

She shuddered, and went into the kitchen. The sergeant followed her and Constable Gravey followed the sergeant. Jerry hesitated, then turned away. He had an idea that Abe Duveen might soon be feeling thirsty enough to return for his two square-faces of gin. So he went behind the house and took cover at a point of vantage.

Jane entered the kitchen.

The hammer could not be found, high or low. They searched the kitchen and the bedroom behind. No hammer. But Constable Gravey found the two high-shouldered bottles of gin under the bed.

"Bootleg stuff," he announced.

"Well, that's something—but I'd prefer that hammer," replied the sergeant gravely.

They returned to the kitchen. Ellen Duveen said that she had last seen the hammer on the floor, where she had dropped it.

"I wouldn't wonder but Billy Bender carried it off," she said. "He was a great hand at hidin' things away."

She looked at Jane Nevers, but Jane looked another way, without a word.

"You know that, Miss Nevers," she continued. "He's carried off enough things from your place, so I've heard—spoons and a pair of scissors and a monkey wrench."

"Billy Bender—or somebody," said Jane gloomily.

The sergeant and the constable looked from one woman to the other. They looked at Jane distastefully, at Ellen Duveen pityingly.

"I'd like to see the dead dog," said Sergeant Tombes.

Poor Ellen! She had to admit that she did not know where the dog was buried. Queer old Bill Bender had not told her and she had not thought to ask.

She went red, then white as paper, then broke into tears.

The policemen looked uncomfortable and Jane Nevers looked judicious. The sergeant shuffled his large, highly polished, spurred shoes. Being of a "mounted" force, he wore spurs even if he did not use a horse.

"Where can we find this William Bender?" he asked.

Mrs. Duveen shook her head, still with her face hidden in her hands.

"I haven't set eyes on him in a month or more," said Jane. "I never heard of him being round here this time of year, before. He don't live anywheres in particular."

The men eyed her solemnly, then gazed even more solemnly at Ellen Duveen's bowed head and quaking shoulders.

"I'm sorry," said the sergeant. "No dog, no ax, no hammer, no Bender." He looked at Jane again, stared at her until she met his look fairly. "You appear to doubt this lady's story," he added.

"Well, as you said yourself, where are the proofs of it—the dead dog, and the ax, and the hammer, and Billy Bender?" she returned.

"It was your brother who first told you about the bloody—the ax with blood on it," Tombes reminded her.

"I don't doubt there was an ax with blood on it," she replied.

The men stepped aside and spoke together in whispers for several minutes. Then Tombes turned back to the women and asked Jane where her brother had gone.

"He's hanging around somewheres handy, you may be sure," she answered significantly.

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"I don't like anything you say nor the way you say it," exclaimed Constable Gravey, with unexpected feeling.

"We might as well hang around too," said the sergeant. "Something might turn up. We won't detain you any longer, Miss Nevers. You can go home and congratulate yourself on the noble way you did your duty. We'll keep your brother with us, of course. He looks honest—but if we acted on people's looks in cases of this kind, I'd arrest you, quick as scat, and give this lady and your brother my blessing. Bob, go tell Mr. Nevers I want him here."

JANE NEVERS stared at the sergeant, dumfounded. Constable Gravey turned toward the door. Then a sudden gust of savage yells arose from somewhere near at hand. Gravey went out at the open door and around the house at top speed, and Sergeant Tombes dashed into the bedroom and dived out through the open window. Both fell upon Jerry Nevers and a big man with a red head, who were rolling on the ground in a furious embrace. The red man had a knife in his hand.

Though Tombes and his understudy knew all the tricks of rough-and-tumble and Jerry was nobody's baby at catch-as-catch-can, every one of the three was bleeding by the time the red man was disarmed and overpowered. They bound one another's wounds.

"I cal'lated he'd soon be back for his two square-faces," said Jerry.

"A good day's work, though not what we were led to expect," said Sergeant Tombes. "Very satisfactory. But I'm still curious—personally, not officially—to know where the ax and hammer and dead dog vanished to—and how?"

"Here comes Billy Bender now," said Jerry.

A strange figure approached from the edge of the woods. The face, hat and clothing were tinted like frost-nipped ferns; and it came on sliding, veering, starting, checking, like a wind-blown autumn leaf.

"How-do, Billy," greeted Jerry.

"How-do, folks," returned Billy.

His face was hairless and deeply wrinkled. His eyes were dark, bright and as young as youth itself.

"Where did you bury the dog?" asked Jerry.

The queer one waved a hand toward the woods.

"What did you do with Mis' Duveen's hammer?"

"I needed a hammer ag'in' the time I git married an' settle down," replied the queer one, chuckling.

"And what did you do with the ax you took from the boat?" asked Constable Gravey, suddenly inspired.

"I needed an ax too, ag'in' gittin' married," replied Billy.

"That's that," said Sergeant Tombes.

He shook Jerry's hand heartily.

"I'm glad it turned out this way," he continued. "We are taking Duveen and the knife and the gin. It will be a long time before Duveen comes back, take my word for it—but I would advise Mrs. Duveen not to be here when he does."

"She won't be," said Jerry. "Nor me, neither."

After Abel Duveen's trial, Ellen got her divorce without difficulty. Jane Nevers has the whole farm to herself now—but she can't get a man to work it for her—not for love or wages.

THE END.

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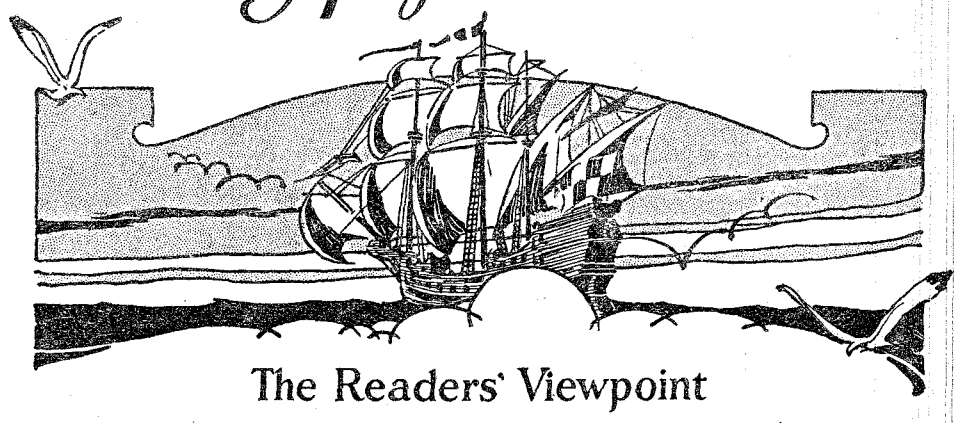
Argonotes.



The Readers' Viewpoint

PARTIAL to the Orient:

Ithaca, N. Y.

The best two stories this year have been "The Decoy," by George F. Worts, and "The Masterman," by Max Brand. Having spent almost six years of my life in the Orient I always enjoy, or should I say, I am more partial to novels of the east, as I enjoy *all the stories.*

REGINALD M. BUTLER.

JOURNALIST W. J. G. S. stirred up a hornets' nest:

Pasadena, Calif.

I have, in the past, been content to sit by and let others criticize and praise, but I've had a change of heart.

Looking in the ARGOSY before me, dated April 29, I read a criticism which burns me up. I'm referring to the gentleman who signs himself W. J. G. S. from Austin, Texas.

Criticism is all right when used in the proper manner, but he, in trying to show his ability as a critic, changes criticism, which should be helpful, to first-class mud-slinging, and he admits it.

Now for something a little pleasanter. Of course I have my preference. MacIsaac is the most versatile writer I've ever read. Packard is very good. Let's have more of him. Burroughs and Kline are, to my mind, a tie. W. Wirt is fine. Theodore Roscoe is second to none, and his "The Kingdom of Hell" starts out with a bang.

My only request is for a few good air-mail stories.

BOB DIEHL.

El Paso, Texas.

Am forty-one years old and have lived seventeen of these, outside of North America, mostly in the Levant and East. Read your weekly brain child with keen enjoyment since before I could count.

Authors make errors, but just because he is brave enough to put his ideas on paper for the rest of the world to read why do a lot of would-be critics insist on throwing rocks? Hammers were made to *construct* things with, not to knock.

Just read comment of W. J. G. S. in April 29 issue and enjoyed a good chuckle.

For myself, there are few I do not read and enjoy, but have a predilection for Central Asian locales.

P. H. M.

Mt. Vernon, N. Y.

Most of the stories in the magazine are good, some exceptionally fine. Of course you can't satisfy everyone on all stories.

The object of this letter is primarily to take exception to Mr. W. J. G. S. "*Journalist,*" who wrote a very stinging letter in "Argonotes," April 29 issue.

Why do you bother to print junk like that?

A. F. HANCHETT.

A NEWSPAPERMAN and an artist also retort:

Fresno, Calif.

How terribly the ARGOSY crew must feel after such a calling down as they got from W. J. G. S., of Austin, Texas, whose letter appears in April 29 ARGOSY! Of course this writer, who, by his own admission has just begun to take his first hesitating steps in the paths of journalism, knows it all! Therefore, he must advise every magazine editor or publisher on earth from the profundity of his own knowledge! And when he condemns, said editors or publishers are expected to wilt down, close up shop, start a bootblack stand, go back to the farm, or call the undertaker!

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And when you desire honest criticism, you are condescendingly advised to call on him. Of course, he is the only one smart enough to give it. He rates so high, in his own estimation, above the rest of us who have spent nearly a quarter of a century as newspapermen, that we couldn't reach him with a stratosphere balloon. Oh, well! We, too, thought we knew it all in our youth.

Personally, I like just such a variety of stories as the ARGOSY publishes, or I wouldn't have been reading it since 1903 with but few intermissions. Western stories grew tiresome some years ago, but occasionally there are interesting ones come along in the ARGOSY. My favorite is adventure stories, both plausible and fantastic. "Toughest in the Legion," "Bellegarde," "The Hidden Door," the *Major Brane* stories, *Bill* and *Jim*, "Sixty Grand," "Lost on Venus,"—and others. Stories by Hopper, Wirt, Brent, Burroughs, Gardner, Brand, Bedford-Jones, are bought on sight.

I have no criticism for any writer on the ARGOSY list. They are all good—bound to be whether their particular story appeals to us personally or not. The fact that they write for the ARGOSY guarantees that.

CHARLES L. MARTIN.

Taunton, Mass.

So W. J. G. S. doesn't care for A. Merritt's stories and for fifty-one weeks there wasn't a good cover.

He is a journalist, I believe; well, I'm studying commercial art and I call the covers excellent. Being an artist I don't think I could criticize a story with any success, do you?

You wouldn't really think of hiring W. J. G. S. as a critic, would you, because I can readily see that every story published would be the kind he likes. Being a journalist I should think he'd realize that a magazine can't satisfy everybody.

By the way, it sounds as if W. S. was a broadcasting station. Well, whether or not he surely did some tall broadcasting.

GRAHAME F. LOVELY.

JOHN H. THOMPSON is back in harness now, and *Bill* and *Jim* are returning:

Toledo, Ohio.

I have just finished W. Wirt's "Face in the Rack" and find it darn good. I wish you had a *Jimmie Cordie* story every week. Anyhow, what has happened to John H. Thompson and his *Bill* and *Jim*? "Oklahoma Stampede" promises to be a corker.

RICHARD LARRIMORE.

SLAUGHTER:

Reading, Pa.

"The Swordsman of Mars" was *too* fantastic, although I like fantastic stories.

By all indications, W. Wirt with his *Jimmie Cordie* and gang will have China depopulated by fall. They certainly can kill 'em.

MacIsaac, Roscoe, Brand, Mason, Seltzer and Horn are all good.

By the way, what has become of C. C. Waddell and Edgar Franklin?

Hoping to sail the good ship ARGOSY for a long time, I remain,

WILLIAM MCCASKEY.

BEST six weeks:

Buffalo, N. Y.

The wonderful stories that you are running recently have caused me to do a radical thing: the writing of a letter of profound approval.

For the past six weeks you have printed what I consider the best stories I have ever read in the ARGOSY.

"The Masterman" and "Lost on Venus" are simply great.

I have read the ARGOSY off and on for about five years. My favorite authors are Cummings, Worts, Burroughs, Kline, Gardner, Roscoe, MacIsaac, Brand, Hopper, Grinstead, Mason and a host of others.

Some of my old pals in the ARGOSY are *Peter the Brazen, Carson Napier, Gillian Hazeltine, Bob Zane,* and *Singapore Sammy*. The "Whispering Tales" are great. They're something new, novel, original and extremely vivid and interesting.

ROBERT WICKS, JR.

"ATROCIOUS":

Waterloo, Iowa.

Until recently I have overlooked some of the atrocious novels, novelettes and short stories. "Death Under Glass" is too putrid and disgraceful to overlook, so here's some complaints: Let us admit that most short stories, novels and novelettes that deal with everyday life should be reasonably plausible. Let's say it might happen to some of us—without stretching words too far. Just note "Death Under Glass" in the April 29 issue.

Let's take *Jimmie Cordie* and his gang of roughnecks—they *were* good at first appearance, but they been on the "air" too long. Those good ol' *Bill* and *Jim* yarns—just good *old stuff* and I might add—nonsense! *Carson Napier* the "demi-god—nerts." Oh, yeah—and "Decoy." For Pete's sake, Worts, me lad, let *Gillian* catch up on *Mark Storm* sometime—have it over with. Surely you have an imagination for other plots than lawyers and courtrooms! You'll call me a big crab. Okay. I have no grudges. I hope that criticism may help the contents of ARGOSY.

Two axioms should fit this whole situation: "You can work a good horse to death!" and

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"Don't let one rotten spot ruin the whole apple!" ARGOSY is *too good* for that!

L. FAWLER.

A TOAST:

Roseville, Ill.

Here's to ARGOSY!

Adventure that thrills every reader. Action in every story and romance enough to create a lasting "hunger" for all your stories.

I haven't a kick about any of your authors or any of their stories. Keep up the good work!

CHAS W. BYERS.

SIX years and going strong:

Delta, Ohio.

I guess my favorite stories are the "impossible" and adventure such as "Lost on Venus," "The Fourth Compadre," "Forbidden Timber," etc. There have been no stories yet in ARGOSY which I haven't read and enjoyed since about six years ago.

AL VASKO.

WANTS a sequel to "The Swordsman of Mars":

Queens Village, N. Y.

I've been reading your magazine for quite a time, and it seems to get better and better each issue. But, for the love of mud, please cut out those terrible *Bill* and *Jim* stories. Give us some more like "The Dwellers in the Mirage." That was swell. Yowsir. All your science-fiction is good. By the way, what became of the Martian that was sent to Earth in "The Swordsman of Mars"? Give us a story about his adventures.

JOSEPH DOCKWEILER.

ANXIOUS about *Singapore Sammy* (he's at it again in "Isle of the Meteor" next month):

Washington C. H., Ohio.

I have just finished the second part of "The Python Pit." It's just fine. I am very anxious to see how *Singapore Sam* gets out of that trap.

Those *Jimmie Cordie* novelettes are good, but I would like to see a long serial about him and his buddies.

And, speaking of serials, I prefer to read long serials, rather than those short two or three-part ones. They are interesting, but they end too soon. Five, or better, six-part serials seem to be just right.

"The Kingdom of Hell" was fine. I liked the way it ended. I was afraid that he would marry the princess, or something, as most of that kind of stories usually end.

IVAN M. BOYER.

MORE baseball? There's a World Series mystery novel coming, "The Diamond Specter," by H. L. McNary:

Arverne, N. Y.

Just a word about your stories in the book. I think that the two best stories and authors I have read this year are "Lost on Venus," by Burroughs, and "The Masterman," by Brand. Let's have some more of them; also some more of baseball, like "Ole Olsen's Jump Ball."

MILTON FLAUM.

HOW do we get such authors?

Garfield, N. J.

I haven't been reading the ARGOSY long (half a year). I'm sorry I didn't find out sooner about it; it certainly is a damn good magazine. What gets me is how you get those big authors to write for the ARGOSY and still sell the magazine for ten cents. Well, I'll sign off now. I like pretty near all your stories.

M. HAURAN.

SHOULD be a movie:

Holyrood, Kans.

I wish to congratulate Theodore Roscoe and ARGOSY on the story "The Kingdom of Hell."

It was a wonderful story, well written and I could not help but think what a movie it would make.

ARTHUR S. MAYO.

HODGE-PODGE:

Brooklyn, N. Y.

You can't please every one with every issue, I realize, but on a whole you usually do a good job. But when you try to say that "The Kingdom of Hell," by Theodore Roscoe, is a story, I wonder if you or your readers read it before acceptance. If so you better get a new reader. It's rotten, just a hodge-podge of words.

Why not give us good stories like "Sixty Grand," "The Tyrant of Technocracy," "The Hidden Door," "The Earth Shaker"? "The Golden City," in the latest issue, starts off fine. And how about *Peter the Brazen*, did he die or something? A few more gangster stories wouldn't do any harm; they are as good reading as the Wild West stories you publish every so often.

I still think ARGOSY is the best, but don't slip.

R. R. A.

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IN accordance with the votes of a majority, we are devoting to additional fiction the space formerly allotted to the Narrative Cross-Word Puzzle. Those who enjoyed the puzzles may like to know that Mr. Tingley has a similar puzzle each week in ARGOSY's sister magazine, DETECTIVE FICTION WEEKLY.

ANSWER TO LAST WEEK'S PUZZLE

■	■	G	R	I	E	F	■	H	A	S	■	■
■	S	O	O	N	E	R	■	A	R	E	A	■
S	L	A	T	■	R	O	B	■	C	A	B	S
E	A	T	■	W	I	N	E	S	■	T	O	E
A	M	■	W	H	E	T	T	E	D	■	A	N
■	■	P	I	E	■	S	■	R	E	A	R	S
S	H	A	D	E	S	■	D	I	V	I	D	E
H	O	T	E	L	■	S	■	O	I	L	■	■
O	N	■	R	E	S	T	F	U	L	■	M	E
R	O	D	■	D	A	R	E	S	■	J	A	R
T	R	A	P	■	T	E	N	■	H	A	T	E
■	S	T	A	B	■	S	C	H	E	M	E	■
■	■	E	Y	E	■	S	E	E	M	S	■	■

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Editor, ARGOSY,
280 Broadway, N. Y. C., N. Y.

The stories I like best in this issue of the magazine are as follows:

1.....

2.....

3.....

4.....

5.....

Name.....

Street.....

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Fill out coupons from the ten most recent issues, send them all at one time, and get an ARGOSY cover reproduction.

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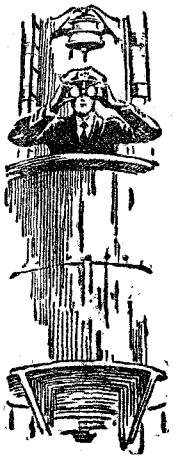
7-8



Looking Ahead!

The Job at Pistol Bar

Trouble-shooter and under-cover man Terry Kilroe gets a job on the skyscraper hotel being built at Pistol Bar—and ominous "accidents" start happening! A long novelette by

Will McMorrow

Monsieur Murder

Rival sharpshooters of the World War in an amazing feud. A novelette by

Theodore Roscoe

The Black Pearl

An unusual story of India, land of elephants and jungle adventure, by

Paul Annixter

NINE VARIED STORIES IN NEXT WEEK'S ARGOSY—JULY 15

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Somebody WANTS YOUR JOB!

RIGHT NOW, at this very moment, another man has his eye on your job. If he hasn't already made a bid for it, he will!

Don't blame him. Like you, he must work to live. It's not personal envy of you — it's his need of a job and his conclusion he can do the job better than you. Or he may be willing to do it as well for less. Unpleasant suggestions — but true!

What are you doing about it? Nothing? — then look out! You must keep the job yourself. Here is what many men in your fix are doing —

They're safeguarding themselves by making themselves more valuable on their jobs. They're enrolling for courses with the International Correspondence Schools, and studying them in spare time. Furthermore — and vitally important — they are preparing themselves for promotions that lie in the future. Are you interested? This coupon will bring you complete information — free. And if you decide to study a course, *you can arrange to pay for it in easy partial payments.* Mail the coupon today!

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Without cost or obligation, please send me a copy of your booklet, **"Who Wins and Why,"** and full particulars about the subject *before* which I have marked X:

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☐ Architect	☐ Automobile Mechanic
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☐ Structural Draftsman	☐ Steam Electric Engineer
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☐ Electrical Engineer	☐ Refrigeration
☐ Electric Lighting	☐ R. R. Locomotives
☐ Welding, Electric and Gas	☐ R. R. Section Foreman
☐ Reading Shop Blueprints	☐ R. R. Bridge and Building Foreman
☐ Telegraph Engineer	☐ Air Brakes ☐ Train Operation
☐ Telephone Work	☐ Highway Engineering
☐ Mechanical Engineer	☐ Chemistry ☐ Pharmacy
☐ Mechanical Draftsman	☐ Coal Mining Engineer
☐ Machinist ☐ Toolmaker	☐ Navigation ☐ Boilermaker
☐ Patternmaker	☐ Textile Overseer or Supt.
☐ Pipefitter ☐ Tinsmith	☐ Cotton Manufacturing
☐ Bridge Engineer	☐ Woolen Manufacturing
☐ Bridge and Building Foreman	☐ Agriculture ☐ Fruit Growing
☐ Gas Engines ☐ Diesel Engines	☐ Poultry Farming ☐ Radio
☐ Aviation Engines	☐ Marine Engineer

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☐ Traffic Management	☐ Civil Service
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	☐ Railway Mail Clerk
☐ Bookkeeping	☐ Grade School Subjects
☐ Secretarial Work ☐ Spanish	☐ High School Subjects
☐ Cost Accountant ☐ French	☐ College Preparatory
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	☐ Lumber Dealer

Name..... Age.....

Street Address.....

City..... State.....

Occupation.....

If you reside in Canada, send this coupon to the International Correspondence Schools Canadian, Limited, Montreal, Canada

Confidence — and Cash

"The N. I. A. training has taught me how to write a good news story, and why it should be written that way. By applying this knowledge I was enabled, before quite completing the course, to sell a feature story to **Screenland Magazine** for $50. That resulted in an immediate assignment to do another for the same magazine. I am now doing fiction and have had one short short story published. Previous to enrolling in the N. I. A. I had never written a line for publication, nor seriously expected to do so."—Gene E. Levant, 2600 Wilshire Blvd., Los Angeles, Cal.

How do *you* know *you can't WRITE?*

Have you ever tried?

Have you ever attempted even the least bit of training, under competent guidance?

Or have you been sitting back, as it is so easy to do, waiting for the day to come some time when you will awaken, all of a sudden, to the discovery, "I **am** a writer"?

If the latter course is the one of your choosing, you probably **never will write.** Lawyers must be law clerks. Doctors must be internes. Engineers must be draftsmen. We all know that, in our times, the egg does come before the chicken.

It is seldom that any one becomes a writer until he (or she) has been writing for some time. That is why so many authors and writers spring up out of the newspaper business. The day-to-day necessity of writing—of gathering material about which to write—develops their talent, their background and their confidence as nothing else could.

That is why the Newspaper Institute of America bases its writing instruction on journalism—continuous writing—the training that has produced so many successful authors.

Learn to write by writing

NEWSPAPER Institute training is based on the New York Copy-Desk Method. It starts and keeps you writing in your own home, on your own time. Week by week you receive actual assignments, just as if you were right at work on a great metropolitan daily. Your writing is individually corrected and constructively criticized. A group of men with 182 years of newspaper experience behind them are responsible for this instruction. Under such sympathetic guidance, you will find that (instead of vainly trying to copy some one else's writing tricks) you are rapidly developing your own distinctive, self-flavored style—undergoing an experience that has a thrill to it, and which at the same time develops in you the power to make your feelings articulate.

Many people who **should** be writing become awe-struck by fabulous stories about millionaire authors and, therefore, give little thought to the $25, $50 and $100 or more that can often be earned for material that takes little time to write—stories, articles on business, fads, travels, sports, recipes, etc.—things that can easily be turned out in leisure hours, and often on the impulse of the moment.

How you start

We have prepared a unique Writing Aptitude Test. This tells you whether you possess the fundamental qualities necessary to successful writing—acute observation, dramatic instinct, creative imagination, etc. You'll enjoy taking this test. The coupon will bring it, without obligation. Newspaper Institute of America, 1776 Broadway, New York.

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1776 Broadway, New York

Send me, without cost or obligation, your **Writing Aptitude Test** and further information about writing for profit.

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Mrs. .....
Miss

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Why don't you write?

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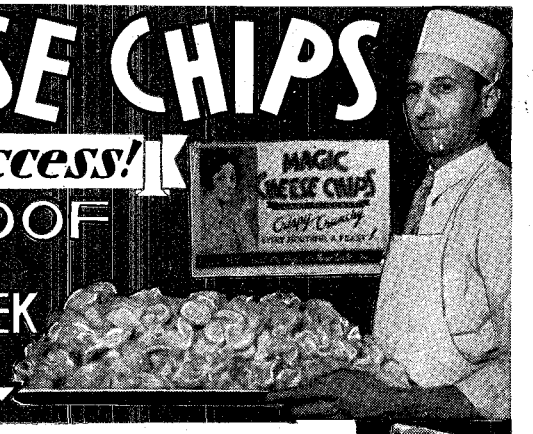
MAGIC CHEESE CHIPS

Coast-to-Coast Success!

POSITIVE PROOF OF UP TO $60 TO $300 A WEEK AT HOME



NO HOUSE-TO-HOUSE CANVASSING

Experience Unnecessary—No Costly Machine to Buy

The new coast-to-coast food hit. You work at home, chips come to you already made. Simply drop into hot grease and they're ready to eat! No complicated work, no experience, no failures! Positive proof of opportunity to make up to $30 *first day.* Distributors now making high as $60 to $300 a week clear! Not a machine. No need to buy special equipment. Stores do your selling for you. A phenomenal success! Sells faster than potato chips, do-nuts. Magic Cheese Chips are big, fluffy, giant-size chips bigger than potato chips. Irresistible taste makes them act like an appetizer. The more you eat, the more you want to eat, and you never get filled up! It's a revelation! Nothing like it. Crowds, Maine to California devouring thousands of pounds weekly!

PAYS TREMENDOUS PROFITS!

An enormous profit on a small investment! Everyone likes this tasty tidbit any time of the day. 5 and 10 cent bags of Magic Cheese Chips sell like wildfire. Sales often run up to hundreds of dollars daily.

MEN, WOMEN EVERYWHERE Start at Scratch, Build Up to 1,000 Pound a Month Businesses

Men and women succeed alike—no super-salesmanship—no skill—no canvassing. E. Weiler, California, starts with 10 pounds, uses profits to build up to 30 pounds, then 60 pounds, then places standing order for 150 pounds EVERY THREE DAYS! ALL PAID FOR OUT OF PROFITS! One of the largest bakery chain systems in the U. S. bids for exclusive rights in 200 cities, but we had already allowed exclusive rights to others, except in 9 cities which they grab eagerly. Buy 150 pounds at a clip for each store! J. F. Knudson, living in a small New York city, wires, "RUSH ONE HUNDRED TWENTY POUNDS. OUR TRADE WILL REQUIRE UPWARD OF FIVE HUNDRED POUNDS MONTHLY." Large Pacific Coast concern wires, "INCREASE STANDING ORDER TO ONE HUNDRED FIFTY POUNDS WEEKLY. SHIP TODAY SURE THIRTY POUNDS ADDITIONAL EXPRESS." Long distance calls, telegrams flooding in from everywhere—we've had our plant working twenty-four hours a day to meet the demand! No hard times for MAGIC CHEESE CHIPS!

YOU DON'T INVEST A RED CENT

until you have sold yourself on the possibilities. You must sell yourself first before we permit you to invest, and our novel plan enables you to decide without cost! Then you can start with $8.50 investment, put back the enormous profits, building up without another penny investment if you wish!

EVERYTHING FURNISHED

We furnish everything—advertising, display stands, etc. Don't wait until it's too late to get the FIRST BIG PROFITS in *your* locality. Mail the coupon at once for complete details and share the enormous profits immediately!

FLUFF-O MFG. CO. Dept. 2032-G St. Louis, Mo.

NEW NOW!

The Smash Hit of the day! The big fad at parties, outdoor games. People everywhere munching 'em on the streets! Takes instantly. Biggest food novelty boom in years!

VIRGIN TERRITORY EVERYWHERE

Hundreds of successful businesses now operating. Thousands of open territories. Hundreds of cities open—thousands of small towns. Immediate success possible anywhere. Write today.

SEND for ACTUAL PHOTO-COPIES of ORDERS from MAGIC CHIP DEALERS

Bonafide Proof of Profits!

See the actual orders with which men and women with small capital start, then see the orders they send out of profits! No claims. We let the facts speak for themselves. Look into this now while you have FIRST CHANCE at the profits in your locality. No obligation. Mail the coupon immediately—later may be too late.

MAIL FOR COMPLETE DETAILS

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Dept. 2032-G
St. Louis, Mo.

Without obligation to me, rush full information at once about Magic Cheese Chips and your proposition where I can make up to $60 to $300 a week at home.

Name .....

Address .....

.....

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